ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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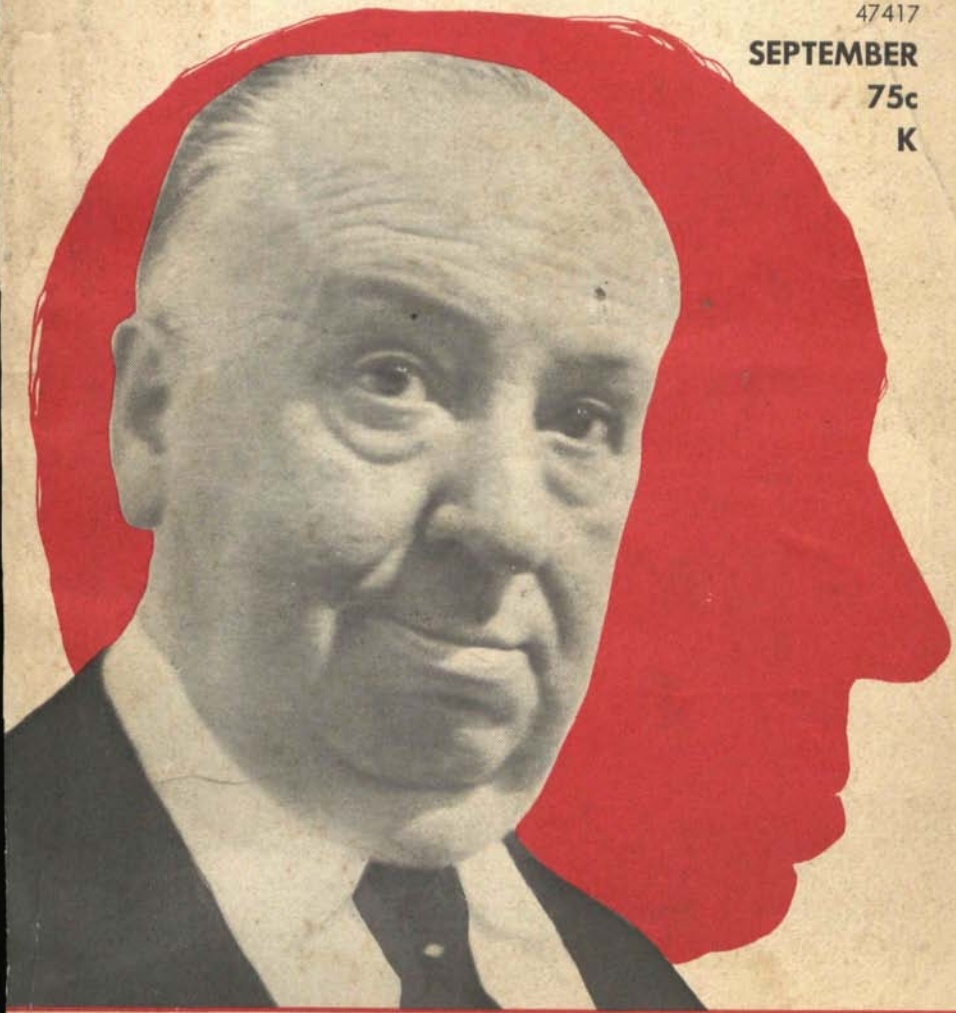

NEW stories presented by the MASTER of SUSPENSE

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September 1973

Dear Reader:

If astrology can truly indicate one's compatibility with another, then apparently none of those who people this month's pages bothered to read his horoscope. Friendly relationships are virtually unheard of in these new stories. Neutrality is forbidden; everyone gets involved.

A rich harvest of mayhem is yours for the reading, from *A State of Preparedness* by William Brittain to Virginia Long's novelette of a poet's anguish, titled *A Fine and Private Place.* So if your stars hint of misfortune, it should not be construed as anything personal. It could only apply, for a certainty, to those of whom you read herein.

To correct any misleading forecast possibly caused by, say, interstellar collisions or shooting stars, I can put your fears to rest. After a thorough examination of the charts, I can safely predict that in the coming hours and days you will enjoy considerable

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 18, NO. 9 SEPTEMBER 1973

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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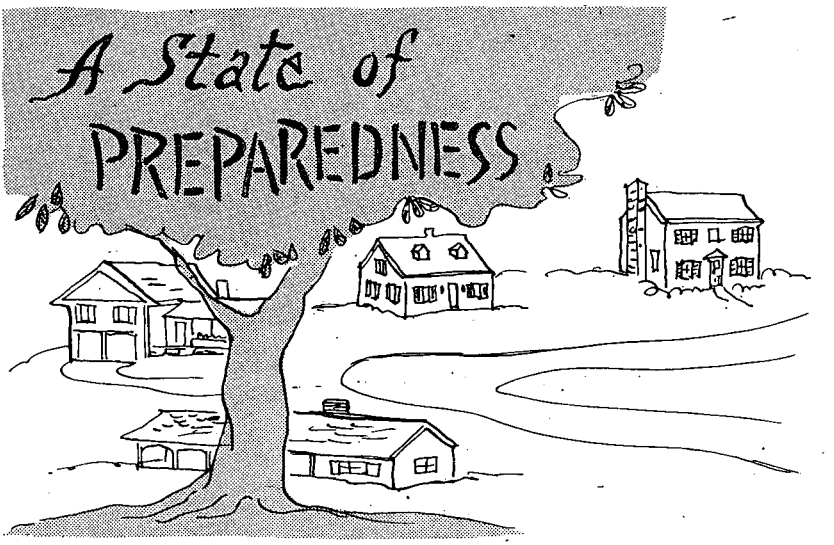
It appears that even that famous motto of the GOOD scouts could lend itself to misinterpretation.



It was the morning of our first full day in the new house on Applewood Crescent. I stood in the front yard, breathing deeply of the clean country air and rubbing muscles which ached from the unaccustomed labor of moving furniture. Ann and I had been up until almost midnight just getting settled. She was still asleep, but I had to get up early to take a good look at the house and grounds of which I was now the proud owner—or at least part owner, with the bank holding a mortgage on the rest.

Applewood Crescent was the name the builder had given to the short, curved road which connected the main highway with what had formerly been a farmer's woodlot. One day there would be a big real estate development in this area, and bulldozers had already chewed out the beginnings of two other streets to be called Blossom Lane and Chrysanthemum Way. Next spring, when

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there would be no danger of frost and the workers could pour cement, I looked forward with misgivings to a Dandelion Drive, an Elderberry Trail and so on, right through the whole floral alphabet.

For now, there were only the

by William Brittain

four houses which faced Applewood Crescent. Next to my small Cape Cod was a two-story colonial, and on the other side of the road were a split-level and a ranch. Surrounding the houses was a wooded area, and I knew my son Scott would have the time of his life playing Tarzan or cowboys-and-Indians among the trees. I gazed with dismay at the neatly-trimmed lawns surrounding the other three houses and then at my own front yard where tall grass and weeds formed a knee-high jungle.

"It won't look so bad once it's cut back. I've got a sickle in my garage, if you'd like to use it."

The man standing at the edge of the property line, judging by his completely gray hair, which was cut short in military style, and the lines in his face, was at least fifty years old, but he stood ramrod straight, and I could see bunches of muscle ripple in his shoulders and arms, even beneath his sweater.

"I'm Cory Russell," he said in a voice that crackled with authority. "Helen—my wife—and I are your next-door neighbors."

"Roger Hilfiker," I replied, shaking hands. As I wrapped my fingers around his palm, I could feel a hard, leathery callus along its edge.

"C'mon in," he said, jerking a thumb toward the front door of the colonial house. "I'll have Helen rustle us up some coffee. We can relax and get acquainted."

The Russell livingroom looked like some kind of military museum. The pictures, with the exception of one painted landscape, were all photographs of various Army units. A design featuring a cannon and caisson was woven into the rug. In one corner, a brass shell case had been turned into a wastebasket, and over the mantle, in place of the traditional musket, hung an M-1 rifle.

At a request from Cory—which sounded to me more like a command—Helen Russell, a short, plump woman, bustled into the kitchen, and I heard the clank of a kettle being placed on the stove.

Cory settled down into a

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leather chair. "Do you like the room?" he asked.

"It's . . . very unusual," I replied.

"I was in World War II," he snapped, as if daring me to argue with him. "Damn proud to have been a part of it. European theater of operations. That rifle," he gestured toward the M-1, "took me from Normandy right across the Rhine River."

Helen Russell brought in two cups of instant coffee and returned to the kitchen without saying a word. As I took my first sip, Cory stood up, walked to the closet and brought out his Army dress jacket. "Take a look at that, Roger. Pretty good, eh?"

Four rows of campaign ribbons made a riot of color above the jacket's breast pocket. There were also several medals, among which I recognized the Purple Heart. On the sleeve, the sergeant's stripes pointed upward like the points of three spears.

"Very impressive," I said.

"I can still get into it, too." He slipped his arms into the sleeves, fastened the front, and slapped a hand against his flat belly. "I don't weigh an ounce more than I did in '44," he gloated. "By the way, Roger, what branch of the service were you in?"

"I was never in the service," I answered, briefly and peremptorily.

"Oh," he muttered. "One of them. Roger the Dodger, eh?" He chuckled to himself.

I could feel my face getting red with anger, and I clenched my teeth for fear of saying something I'd be sorry for later. "No, not one of them," I said, my voice quavering. "I tried to enlist. It was around the time of Korea. They wouldn't take me. High blood pressure."

"Yeah," he said dryly. "Well, c'mon, Roger the Dodger. Let's go see about that sickle."

The interior of the Russell garage looked like a combination garden store and military supply depot that had been hit by a tornado. Khaki-webbed belts hung from the handles of gasoline lawn mowers, while grass seed and shovels fought for space with bayonets, tank treads and Army canteens. Rusting tools filled wooden boxes that had formerly contained ammunition.

"That sickle should be around here somewhere," said Cory, poking through a pile of moldering tents. "The lieutenant would have given me hell if I made such a mess while I was in the service. Have a look on those shelves near the door, will you?"

I groped among the boxes placed on the shelves, hoping I

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wouldn't cut myself on the blade of the sickle if I found it. My hand touched something hidden way back near the wall. My fingers curled around the object, which fitted neatly into my palm. It seemed to be curved, and there were ridges along it. For a better grip, maybe?

I pulled my hand out and looked at the thing I was holding. About six inches long, it had an oval shape with deep grooves in the sides. Made of heavy metal, it was painted a dark green except for the ring at the top and the lever which extended down one side.

It was a hand grenade.

I stared at it with as much loathing as if I'd been holding a live rattlesnake. *Don't be silly,* I thought to myself. *It has to be a dud. And what could be more natural than that with his other souvenirs?* Idly, I toyed with the ring which held the lever in place.

"Hey! Roger! Put that down!"

The crisp command startled me, and I almost dropped the grenade. With a convulsive movement, I put it back on the shelf and snatched my hand away as if it had been burned.

"You . . . you shouldn't mess around on those shelves too much," Cory said slowly. There was an odd quality about his voice. "Besides, I found the sickle. Here." He held out the tool to me, blade foremost.

I didn't reach out to take it. Instead, I found myself staring at the tremor which had seized Cory's arm and which made the blade of the sickle shake wildly. His fist clenched the handle of the tool as if trying to crush it. His strange tone of voice and the sudden trembling could mean only one thing: the man was deathly afraid of something—but what did he have to fear?

There was only one possible answer. It was insane, but . . .

"Cory, that grenade. It's live, isn't it?"

"Look, I . . . Do you want the sickle or don't you?"

"The grenade, Cory. If I'd pulled the pin, I'd have killed us both. That's right, isn't it? The damage one grenade could do . . ."

He shook his head and smiled grimly. "Not one, Roger the Dodger. I've got three of 'em."

I could feel cold sweat popping out on my forehead. "Three?" I whispered. "But why?"

"A man's got to be prepared, that's why. Prepared for anything."

"But, Cory, this isn't war. We're just some families living on

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the same street. Do the rest of your neighbors know you've got these things?"

He advanced toward me, the sickle still in his hand. "Maybe they do, and maybe they don't," he said calmly. "But I'm sure you'll tell 'em, once you get out of here. Now, do you want this thing or not?" He raised the arm holding the sickle.

Without answering, I turned and scrambled through the door that led back into the house. Mumbling something to Helen Russell, who looked up in surprise from her sewing as I passed by, I fled through the kitchen, the livingroom, and out the front door.

Entering my own house on a dead run, I slammed the door behind me and locked it. Ann was sitting at the kitchen table, having breakfast.

"Hi," she called brightly. "I'm glad to see you're getting acquainted with the neighbors. But why lock the door? Afraid of robbers way out here in the country?" A worried look crossed her face. "Roger, what's the matter? You're as white as a sheet."

I sat down at the kitchen table and somehow sputtered out the story about Cory Russell and his three hand grenades.

"Roger, you're sure?" I nodded. "But what could the man be thinking of? And what do you do in a case like this? Should we call the police?"

"I . . . I don't know, Ann."

"But something should be done."

"I know. The other people—the ones across the street—maybe they'll have some suggestions. At least I ought to warn them."

Ann walked to the window and peered out. "If you do go, be careful," she said. "I don't see anybody outside, but if this Mr. Russell is anything like the way you described him, he's a dangerous man."

"All right," I answered. "And while I'm gone, keep the door locked. There's no telling what an idiot like that might do. And don't let Scott play outdoors, no matter how much he teases."

Without waiting for Ann's reply, I went out the back door and walked around the far side of the house in order to be hidden as long as possible from the Russells' place. Then I made a mad dash to the ranch across the street. I glanced back just once at the Russell house and thought I saw a curtain move, but I could have been mistaken about that. Circling the ranch, I pounded on the back door.

The door was opened by a big woman whose hands and forearms

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were covered with flour. "Excuse it," she said cheerfully. "It's pie day. I'm Maggie Malett, and you must be the new folks in the Cape Cod."

I nodded, still trying to catch my breath, and introduced myself. "Is—is your husband home?" I stammered.

"Yeah, he's in the livingroom." She turned her head toward the door at the far end of the kitchen. "Bert!" she bellowed. "You've got company. It's the new fella who moved in across the street. C'mon out and meet him."

The man who appeared in the doorway was an inch or so taller than I, and had a build like a brick wall. His face, which resembled a slab of granite, broke into a broad smile as he looked at me.

"You must be Roger the Dodger," he drawled. "No disrespect intended, but it did sound kind of funny."

"Funny? But how could you—"

"Cory Russell just phoned me. He said you'd dropped by."

"Did he tell you what else happened?"

Bert Malett eyed me curiously. "I don't really know what you mean, Mr. Hilfiker. Cory just told me you'd come over to borrow a sickle, but when you left you forgot to take it with you."

"Mr. Malett, I wonder if—"

"Call me Bert. Everybody does."

"Okay, Bert." I glanced at Maggie Malett and then back at her husband. "Could you and I have a talk . . . alone?"

He shrugged his huge shoulders. "I don't see why not. We can go into the livingroom. The kids are out playing, so they won't bother us. By the way, didn't I see a boy going into your house yesterday?"

"That's Scott, my son," I answered, following him through the house.

"Good. That'll be somebody for my kids to play with. Doug's twelve, and Pete will be eight next month." We reached the livingroom, where he sat in an easy chair and gestured for me to take the couch.

"Now, what did you want to see me about?" he asked, lighting a battered pipe.

"It's about Cory Russell," I began.

"Cory?" His eyes narrowed. "What about him?"

"Well . . ." I pushed at my forehead with the heel of my hand. "This is going to sound crazy, but I swear it's the truth. He—he's got three live hand grenades over in his garage."

Bert looked at me oddly, his lips pressed tight together. "You actually saw these grenades?" he

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asked me. He seemed a bit dubious.

I told him about what had happened earlier that morning.

As I finished my story, I expected Bert to laugh at me or else get angry. Instead, he just nodded, his mouth twisted into a snarl. "I always wondered where he kept 'em," he said when I'd finished. "Now I know. But don't you worry, Roger the Dodger, or Mr. Hilfiker, or whatever you want to be called. I've already taken steps to keep Cory Russell from doing anything foolish."

"You mean the police—"

"Nope," he said, rising massively from his chair. "Come on with me."

We reached the door to the cellar, and Bert opened it. "Cory ain't the only one who's had military training," he said as we went down the wooden steps. "I knew when we moved in six months ago that there might be trouble between him and me. So I got this."

From a closet at the foot of the stairs he took a thing that was for all the world like a six-foot length of stovepipe with a handle, a peep sight and some other gadgets mounted on it. It looked vaguely familiar, like something I'd seen once in a magazine photograph.

"It's a bazooka," he said proudly. "An antitank weapon. In Korea, when I was there, two men operated it, but one can do it in an emergency. It fires these things."

He reached into the closet again and pulled out an object about two feet long, with a warhead on one end and fins on the other.

"Looks like a little rocket, don't it?" said Bert. "And that's just what it is, too. One of these babies will blast through armor plate like it was paper. So you see, I don't need to worry much about Mr. Cory Russell and his li'l ol' hand grenades. If he gives you any trouble, just you let me know."

"Bert," I said slowly, trying not to believe what I'd just seen and heard, "where did you get that thing? Isn't it illegal to own?"

"I've still got friends in the service," he answered. "One of 'em smuggled this out of his arsenal and gave it to me. Nobody'll miss it. Things are always getting lost in the military."

"The military! Bert, this is a quiet suburban area. There are women and kids around. It isn't a battlefield."

Bert turned slowly. "Not a battlefield, huh? What about Cory and those grenades of his? That sounds like a battlefield to me. And I mean to protect what's mine."

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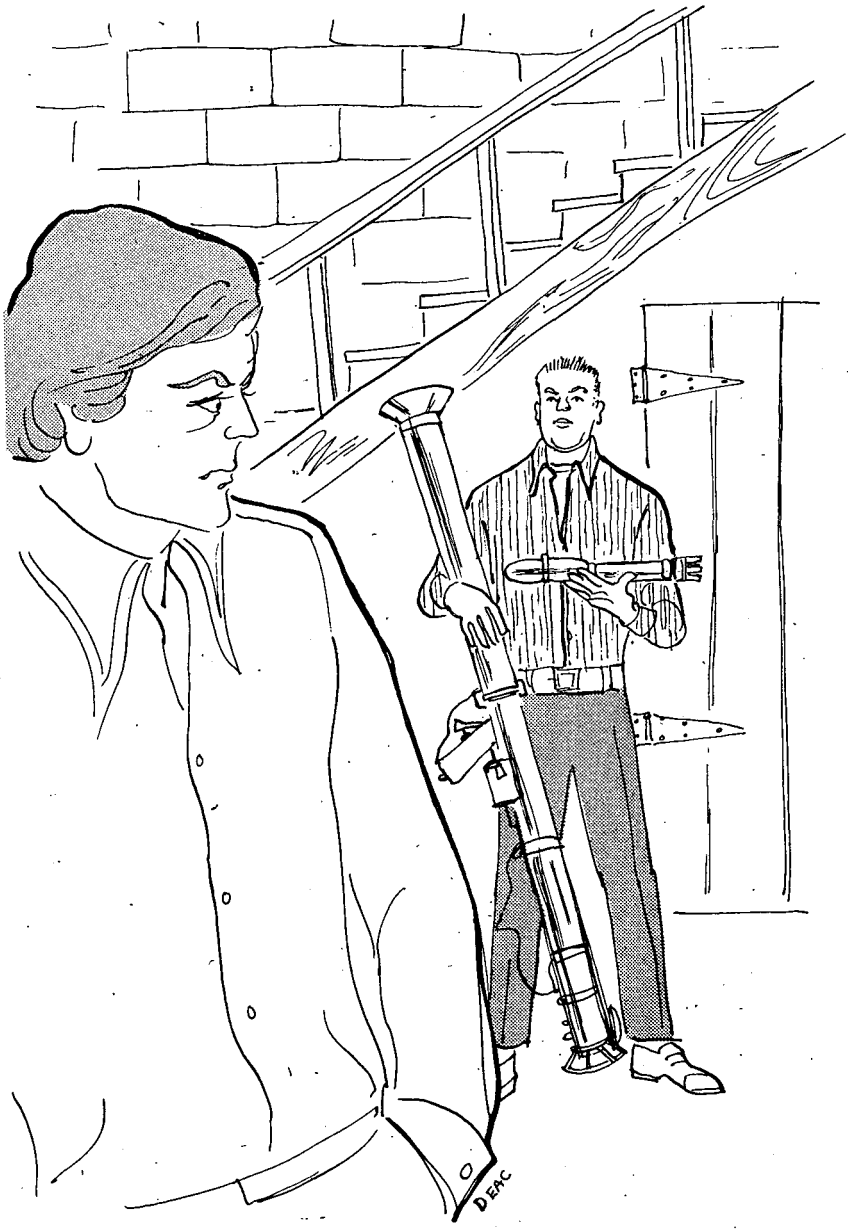

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"But the police are supposed to—"

"Mr. Roger the Dodger Hilfiker, you never were in the service. Cory told me that. Now let me tell you something. When the pin is pulled on one of those grenades of his, it explodes in just five seconds. Don't you figure it'd take the police longer than that to get way out here?"

"Of course, only—"

"Only nothing! The way to handle a man like Cory is to be prepared for anything he might try. I've got to be ready for him twenty-four hours a day. Cory knows I've got this thing in the house. His knowing that makes things mighty calm around here. Sometimes our two families even get together for dinner."

"A kind of truce, you might say," I muttered ironically, "in the middle of a constant state of preparedness."

"You got the picture. And listen, Mr. Roger the Dodger, I know you're not much for fighting. But don't worry, if the time comes, I'll protect you and your family."

I stumbled up the cellar stairs and out of the Malett house, racing blindly across the yard. What kind of lunacy existed on Applewood Crescent, I wondered. "Hand grenades," I babbled to myself. "Bazooka rockets. What next?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Huh?" Startled, I looked about and saw a thin man raking leaves in front of the split-level across the street from my house. He was only in his mid-twenties, and his broken nose gave a little character to what was otherwise quite a bland face.

"Oh, hello." I held out a limp hand which he shook vigorously.

"Danny Crewe's the name," he said. "And you must be Roger the Dodger." He took the curse off the insult by smiling broadly.

"I guess Cory Russell called you, too," I replied with a weak grin. "In case you're interested, Hilfiker's my real name."

"Got a minute, Mr. Hilfiker?" He let the rake drop to the ground. "Perhaps you'd like to come in and meet Barbara. We could have a cup of coffee and get to know one another. Or a beer, if you'd rather."

The thought of beer in the middle of the morning, on top of all I'd been through, made my stomach do flip-flops. "Mr. Crewe . . . Danny . . . what kind of place is this, anyway?"

"What kind of place? My house, you mean? I don't think I understand."

"Not your house especially." I

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waved my arm in a broad circle. "This. Applewood Crescent."

"I still don't get you." Danny held the front door open for me to enter. "Applewood Crescent's just four houses. Life in the country and all that. Of course I got my house a little bit earlier in life than most, because Barbara had a little money put away when I married her. Actually, if there's anything odd about this place, it's you, Mr. Hilfiker."

"Me? What do you mean by that?"

"According to what Cory said on the phone, you're the only one of us out here who's never been in the service. Russell, Malett and I talk about war all the time when we get together. You're going to be left out of a lot of conversations around here, never having been in a battle."

"A battle? I feel like I'm in one right now."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Those two guys, Russell and Malett." I pointed toward the ranch and the colonial. "They've got enough weaponry in their houses to start a war right here. Hand grenades, bazookas—"

"Oh, that. That's nothing to worry about, Mr. Hilfiker."

"Nothing to worry about? Listen, I'm not kidding."

"I know you're not. But in Vietnam, I did demolition. Do you know what that is?"

"You blew things up, I guess."

"That's it. And in my workroom right now, I've got a lump of plastic explosive that weighs more than five pounds. Let either of those two try something, they'll soon see what a real blast is. I'm a pro with that stuff."

"Plastic explosive! Danny, this whole house could blow up with you in it."

He shook his head. The smile on his face was positively saintly. "That plastic explosive's a wonderful substance," he said. "It feels like modeling clay. You can mold it, tear chunks out of it, or hit it with a hammer. Nothing. But put an electrical detonator in it, hook up a battery, and BAM!"

His broad smile turned into a self-satisfied simper. "Of course I wouldn't use the stuff first, you understand. But a man's got to be prepared for anything nowadays."

I don't remember leaving Danny Crewe's house or crossing the street. Back in my own kitchen, I poured a neat three fingers of Scotch, downed it, and slumped into a chair.

"Roger!" gasped Ann. "You look like you'd seen a ghost. What happened out there?"

"Out there?" I shook my head dazedly. "Out there, Ann, the

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world's gone mad—or at least Applewood Crescent has. We've moved into the middle of a bunch of veterans who want to start World War III right here."

Somehow I managed to tell her about my visits with Malett and Crewe. "Oh, Roger," she said when I'd finished, "this is insane. We've got to get in touch with the police."

"The police? Not on your life. I'll bet all three of 'em have got places to hide their private arsenals that no policeman could find. And as soon as the police left, what do you think would happen to us?"

"Then we've got to get away from here as fast as—"

"Where could we go, Ann?" I asked tiredly. "Neither of us has any relatives or friends around here. And just about every cent we have is tied up in this house. We couldn't even afford to go to a motel for more than a night or two. Then we'd have to move back here whether we liked it or not."

"But there must be something we can do!" she cried hysterically. "We've got to fight this situation somehow."

"After what I've seen this morning, Ann, the last thing I want to do is fight."

So we waited. The next three months were a million years long. I doubt that either of us would have gotten any rest at all during that time if I hadn't managed to wheedle some sleeping pills from the doctor. Every morning I'd leave for work, wondering if Ann would be there when I got home, or whether I'd arrive to find that Applewood Crescent had become a huge, smoking hole in the ground. On weekends we'd put Scott in the car and take trips so that for at least a few hours we could be away from that hellish street. Our conversations, when Scott wasn't around, were limited to bombs, explosives, dynamite—and death.

Not that we didn't have a social life. Twice, the Russells invited us over for drinks. The first time, I had three double Scotches instead of my usual one and passed out while thoughts of the three grenades in the garage ran screaming through my head. The second time, I stuck to soft drinks and wished Cory Russell would do the same. Instead, he got progressively more stoned as he regaled us with stories of his exploits in the Army.

During a dinner party at the Maletts', I came close to breaking a platter over Bert Malett's head after he'd called me "Roger the Dodger" about ten times in the first half hour. Only the thought

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of that thing he kept in the basement stopped me. And at an evening of bridge at the Crewe house, I almost went out of my head because I didn't dare light a cigarette for fear I'd set off the plastic explosive.

The morning after the first big snowfall of the season I looked out to see Cory Russell, Bert Malett and Danny Crewe, each shoveling his respective driveway and occasionally pitching friendly snowballs at one another. The scene was so damned *normal* it gave me chills. Each of the three had the power to blast the others off the face of the earth, and they were playing like kids. Bert even pointed at my house and yelled, "Come on out, Roger the Dodger. Or are you afraid of snowballs, too?"

It was on a Saturday morning during the January thaw that Cory Russell appeared at our back door. Ann was upstairs cleaning, and I unlocked the door while Cory wiped the mud from his boots on the mat.

"I want it back, Mr. Roger the Dodger Hilfiker," he said as soon as he'd entered. "It's mine, and I want it back."

I shook my head in confusion. "You want what back, Cory? I don't understand."

"Yeah," he growled, his fists clenched. "I'll just bet you don't. Well, give it back, and there won't be any trouble. Otherwise, I've got two more, you know."

"You've got two—" I stopped and sat down hard on the kitchen chair. "Cory, do you mean one of the grenades is missing?"

"You're a pretty good actor," he snarled. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you didn't take it, the way you're acting. But it's got to be you. You knew right where I had 'em hidden. I guess, since you're the one person in Applewood Crescent who doesn't have the means to protect himself, you decided to wait for your chance. And when I forgot to close the garage door last night—"

At that moment, Ann appeared in the doorway from the livingroom. Her face was ashen, and her voice rasped in her throat. "Cory," she said slowly, "you weren't in your garage earlier this morning? But the garage door was open anyway?"

"The only time I was in it was about two seconds before I came over here," snapped Cory. "Why?"

"Because I looked out of the upstairs window about half an hour ago," Ann replied in a hoarse whisper. She turned to look at me. "Scott was playing over near the Russells' garage with

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Doug and Peter Malett. I saw Peter run into the garage and bring something out underneath his shirt. I-I didn't think much about it at the time, because I supposed Mr. Russell was in there. He's never left the door open before when he wasn't around."

Cory Russell simply stared at Ann, his mouth opening and closing like a beached fish.

"Where are the kids now?" I asked Ann.

"I don't know. Off in the woods somewhere. Oh, Roger, if they start playing with that thing . . ."

I yanked the telephone off the kitchen shelf and dialed the Maletts' number before Cory had time to protest. After explaining the situation, I slammed the receiver back onto its cradle and glared at Cory.

"How do you feel now?" I yelled at him. "Is this what you planned when you brought those grenades into your house—to kill three little boys?"

"But how was I to know? A man's got to protect his property and family. After all, Malett and Crewe have—"

"I know what they have. So now we've got not one but three grown men who want to play soldier and won't be satisfied until they've blown one another off the face of the earth. Well, mister, I'm giving the orders now. I'm going out to find those kids, and you're coming with me. Maybe we won't be too late to undo some of this idiocy."

I shoved Cory toward the back door and followed after him, stopping just long enough to grab a jacket. Outside, I saw Bert Malett running across the street to join us.

"I told Danny Crewe to search the woods in back of his place," Bert said. "We can fan out over here."

As I entered the woods I could hear only the sounds of Cory and Bert as they trampled down the underbrush. I looked for tracks, but most of the snow had melted, leaving only spongy earth. Moving farther among the trees, I caught the cuff of my pants on a rusty piece of barbed wire. As I stopped to release myself, a pheasant clucked several times and then skittered off among the soggy leaves.

After fifteen minutes of hard going through the trees, I stopped to rest. Maybe, I thought, the boys had gone back to the house, or one of the other men might have located them. At least I hadn't heard any explosion.

To my right, I caught a flash of red among the bare branches. Moving toward it, I heard the

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murmur of voices and occasional peals of laughter. "Scott!" I called. "Doug! Pete!"

"Over here, Dad."

I plunged through the undergrowth until I reached a point only a few feet from the small clearing where the boys were playing. There was no sign of the grenade.

"That thing you boys took out of Mr. Russell's garage," I called to Scott, "the hand grenade. Where is it?"

Scott merely shrugged. "I thought Doug had it," he said.

Doug shook his head. "We were playing war with it for a while, Mr. Hilfiker," he said. "but it got boring throwing that ol' iron thing around, so we climbed trees instead."

"Mr. Hilfiker?" I turned. Peter Malett, in a brown snowsuit that made him difficult to spot, was standing near me at the edge of the clearing. "I've got it. Here."

He tossed the grenade to me, but as it flip-flopped through the air, I stared horrified at his middle finger, around which was wrapped the metal ring and its attached pin. In throwing the grenade to me, Peter Malett had accidentally pulled the pin!

The grenade lay at my feet, a small wisp of smoke coming from its top. Reaching down, I snatched at it, drew back my arm and threw. "Get down, boys! Flat on the ground!" I barked in a loud voice.

There was a hollow sound as the grenade bounced off a tree. As I braced my feet to dive down onto my stomach, one boot slipped in the wet mud, and I fell backward instead. Before I had time to hit the ground, the explosion ripped apart the silence of the woods, a sound a hundred times louder than I'd ever imagined. The concussion from the blast seemed to drive my eardrums into my brain, and there was an angry buzzing among the branches as the fragments of the grenade flew by. Seconds later a tree, sheared in two when the grenade went off, crashed to the earth.

I could hear Cory Russell shout something off to my left. Bert Malett answered from somewhere in the woods. Without waiting for them, I stumbled into the clearing, took Scott by the hand, and worked my way back toward the house. As I left the woods, I saw Ann, wild-eyed, running to meet us.

"Roger! Thank God," she sobbed, throwing her arms around me. "I heard the explosion. I thought you were . . . Scott, come to Mother."

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"Not now, Ann," I snapped. "Get a few things together, quick. I'm getting you out of here."

It was two hours later when I drove back to Applewood Crescent. I parked the car in the middle of the street and got out. Cupping my hands at the sides of my mouth, I shouted loudly: "Russell! Malett! Crewe! Come out here, you animals. Come out where I can see you. And bring your weapons with you. All of them. The weapons that almost killed three innocent kids this morning. Come out, or so help me, I'll call the police, the National Guard, and the Army if necessary, to level all these houses to the ground!"

Bert Malett was the first to appear in his doorway. "Take it easy, Hilfiker," he said. "Remember, my kids were out there in the woods this morning, too. But it was an accident, that's all. We can fix it so nothing like this'll ever happen again."

I noticed he was carrying the bazooka and the two rockets that fit it. "Bring that thing over here to me," I snarled back, "and set it down. You other two!" I yelled more loudly. "Hurry it up. If you're not here in one minute, I'm going for the police. And don't think you'll be able to get at me through Ann and Scott. I've taken them away from here, and they won't be back until this is all settled. Move!"

The door of Cory Russell's garage opened, and he came out, carrying a grenade in each hand. At the same time, Danny Crewe approached. In his arms he cradled a heavy metal box.

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you, Roger the Dodger?" Cory said. "You'd really bring the police in on this."

"Right, Cory. Just as any civilized man would do when his family and home are threatened. The question in my mind has never been *if* you'd use these things. The only question was *when*. What would it take to set you off? A borrowed lawn mower that wasn't returned? An argument over a property line? It had to happen somehow, sometime. But I'm going to put a stop to it."

"How?" Danny Crewe asked.

"By taking all these things and getting rid of them."

"Well," smiled Bert Malett, "they aren't exactly the kind of things you leave in a garbage can somewhere."

"I've thought about that. I'll take them over to Elwood Park. That's a good six miles from here, and the park's closed for the winter. I'll leave them there and then the police will get an anonymous

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phone call telling them where to find the stuff. They ought to be able to contact a bomb disposal squad somewhere to take care of it."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you?" Cory said. "But I dunno. I've gotten kind of fond of my grenades."

"I'm taking these weapons, all of them," I answered. "You'll have to kill me to stop me, Cory."

"That wouldn't really be too hard. Now would it?"

"Maybe not. But if I don't get back to Ann this afternoon, she'll send for the police herself, and—"

"Okay, okay," Bert Malett interrupted. "Face it, Cory. Roger the Dodger's got us over a barrel. Maybe . . ." He chuckled wryly. "Maybe we'll just have to learn to trust each other a little bit."

They helped me place the deadly cargo in my car, setting it down in such a way that nothing could explode accidentally. As I pulled out of Applewood Crescent I could see them in the car's mirror, standing in the middle of the street and staring after me.

I didn't return until after dark. I pulled the car into the garage, got out and puttered around awhile, and then settled in for my first eight hours of uninterrupted sleep in three months. Early the next morning I went to the motel where I'd left Ann and Scott, and brought them home.

The weapons? I meant to take them to Elwood Park. Really I did; but six miles at slow speed gave me some time to think and I found that during the trip I had trouble keeping my eyes off the two grenades and the plastic explosive on the seat beside me. The man who owned these things, and a bazooka besides, had power—almost unlimited power. Not that they would ever need to be used. Just possessing them would be enough.

I brought them back, finally, to Applewood Crescent. Right now they're all resting in a locked metal tool closet in my garage, and I have the only key.

I'm just waiting for the next time any one of those three men calls me Roger the Dodger.

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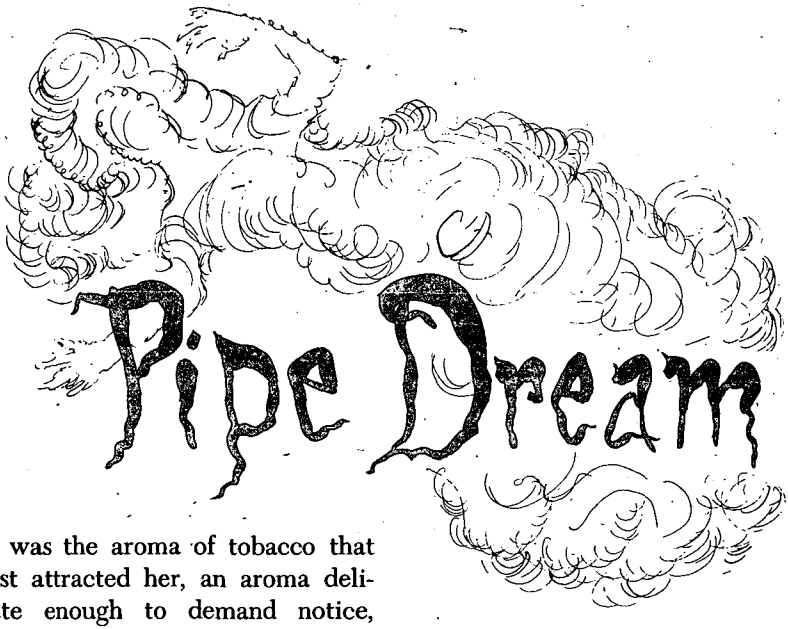
Often a person seems only a little frightening—till one gets to know him much better.



It was the aroma of tobacco that first attracted her, an aroma delicate enough to demand notice, distinctive enough to bludgeon aside the mundane odor of cigarette and cigar. It was the first different thing she'd encountered all evening.

She'd hoped to meet someone at least slightly interesting at Norma's little get-together. Thus far, though, Norma's guest list had been unswervingly true in reflecting Norma's tastes. Emma had only been fooling herself in hoping it would be otherwise.

There, there it was again: open wood fires and honeysuckle; really different, not bitter or sharp at all.

The vacuity of her excuse as she slipped away was matched only by the vacuousness of the young man she left, holding his half-drained martini and third or

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fourth proposition, but the tall football player didn't need sympathy. He shrugged away the brush-off and immediately corralled another of Norma's friends.

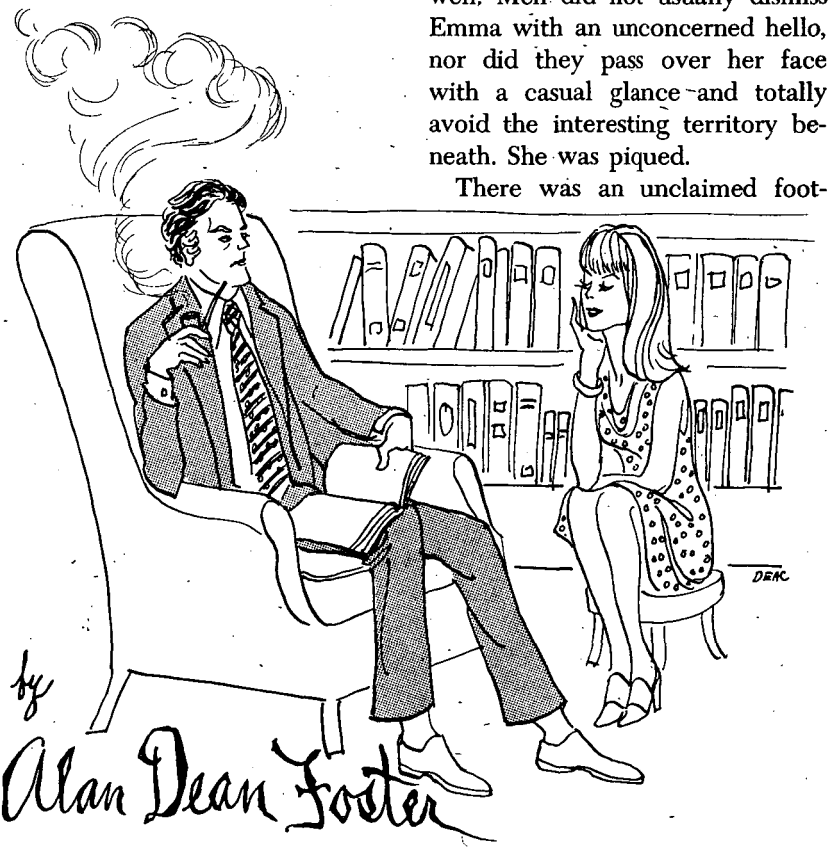
The owner of the pipe was surprise number two. He looked as out of place at the party as a Mozart concerto. Instead of a girl on his lap, he cradled a fat book. He'd isolated himself in a near-empty corner of the sunken livingroom.

She put a hand on the back of his high-backed easy chair. "Hi," she said.

He looked up. "Hello," absently spoken, then back to the book.

Her interest grew. He might be playing indifferent deliberately—but she didn't think so. If he were interested, he sure faked otherwise well. Men did not usually dismiss Emma with an unconcerned hello, nor did they pass over her face with a casual glance and totally avoid the interesting territory beneath. She was piqued.

There was an unclaimed foot-



by Alan Dean Foster

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stool nearby. She pulled it up next to the bookcase and sat down facing him. He didn't look up.

The man was well-tanned, no beard or moustache (another anomaly). His dark wavy hair was tinged with gray at the sharp bottom of modest sideburns. He might even be over forty. His jaw was pronounced, but otherwise his features were small, almost childlike. Even so, there was something just a little frightening about him.

She didn't scare easily. "I couldn't help noticing your tobacco."

"Hmmm?" He glanced up again.

"Your tobacco. Noticing it."

"Oh, really?" He looked pleased, took the pipe out of his mouth and admired it. "It's a special blend. Made for me. I'm glad you like it." He peered at her with evident amusement. "I suppose next you'll tell me you love the smell of a man's pipe."

"As a matter of fact, usually I can't stand it. That's what makes yours nice. Sweet."

"Thanks again." Was that a faint accent, professionally concealed?

He almost seemed prepared to return to his book. A moment's hesitation, then he shut it with a snap. Back it slipped into its notch in the bookcase. She eyed the spine to identify the work.

"Dürer. You like Dürer, then?"

"Not as art. But I do like the feel of a new book." He gestured negligently at the bookcase. "These are all new books." A little smile turned up the corners of his mouth.

"It says '1962' on the spine of that one," she observed.

"Well, not new, then. Say, 'unused.' No, I'm not crazy about Dürer as an artist. But his work has some real value from a medical history standpoint."

Emma sat back on the footstool and clasped a knee with both hands. This had the intended effect of raising her skirt provocatively. He took no notice as she asked, "In what do you specialize?"

"How marvelous!" he said. "She does not say, 'Are you a doctor?' but immediately goes on to 'in what do you specialize?' assuming the obvious. It occurs to me, young lady, that behind that starlet facade and comic-book body, there may be a brain."

"Please, good sir," she mock-pleaded, "you flatter me unmercifully. And I am not a 'starlet.' I'm an actress. To forestall your next riposte, I'm currently playing in a small theater to very good reviews and very small audiences. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and

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it's *not* a rock musical, you know."

He was nodding. "Good, good."

"Do I get a gold star on my test, teacher?" she pouted.

"Two. To answer your question, if you're really curious, I happen to specialize in endocrinology. You," he continued comfortably, "do not appear to be adversely affected where my field is concerned. Please don't go and make an idiot of me by telling me about your thyroid problems since the age of five."

She laughed. "I won't."

"Isn't this a delightful party?"

"Oh yes," she deadpanned. "Delightful."

He really smiled then, a wide, honest grin, white crescent cracking the tan. "If you're interested in art, I have a few pieces you might appreciate. Oils, pen-and-ink, no etchings." Grin. "The people in them don't move, but they're more full of life than this bunch."

"I think I'd like that." She smiled back.

It was a longer drive than she'd expected. In Los Angeles, that means something; a good twenty minutes north of Sunset, up Pacific Coast Highway, then down a short, bumpy road.

The house was built on pilings out from a low cliff, to the edge of the ocean. The sea hammered the wood incessantly, December songs boiling up from the basement.

"Like something to drink?" he asked.

She was examining the den; cozy as mittens, masculine as mahogany; hatch-cover table; old, very un-mod, supremely comfortable chairs; a big fat brown elephant of a couch in which you could vanish.

"Can you make a ginger snap?" she asked.

His eyebrows rose. "With or without pinching her?"

"With."

"I think so. A minute."

Behind the couch, the wide picture window opened onto a narrow porch, that overhanging a black sea. The crescent of lights from Santa Monica Bay had the look of a flattened Rio de Janeiro, unblinking in the clear winter night. Northward, the hunchback of Point Dume thrust out of the water.

The opposite wall was one huge bookcase. Most of them were medical tomes, titles stuffed with Latin nouns. There were several shelves of volumes in German, a single one in French, yet another in what seemed like some sort of Scandinavian language.

Crowded into a small corner of

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the north wall, almost in embarrassment, were a group of plaqued diplomas from several eastern institutions and, to match the books, one in German and another in French.

The art, of which there wasn't much, consisted mostly of small pieces. Picasso she expected, but not the original Dalis, nor the Winslow Homer, the charming Wyeth sketches, some English things she didn't recognize, and the framed anatomical drawings of da Vinci—not originals, of course. Over the fireplace, in a massive oak frame, hung a glowing Sierra Nevada landscape by Bierstadt. A distinctive collection . . . just like its owner, she mused.

"With pinch."

She whirled, missed a breath. "You startled me!"

"Fair play. You've already done the same to me, tonight."

She took the glass, walked over to the couch, sat and sipped. "Very slight pinch," she murmured appreciatively.

He walked over and sat down next to her.

"I wouldn't expect you to be the sort to go to many of Norma's parties," she said.

"Was that the name of our charming hostess? No, I don't." There was a long rack holding twenty-odd pipes on the table. A lazy Susan full of different tobaccos rested at one end. He selected a new pipe, began stuffing it. "If you believe it, I was invited by one of my patients."

She giggled. The drink was perfect.

"I'm afraid it's true," he said. "She was concerned for my supposed monastic existence. Poor Mrs. Marden." He put pipe to lips, took out a box of matches.

"Let me," she said, the lighter from her purse already out.

"Uh-uh. Not with that." He gently pushed her hand away. The wrist tingled after he removed his hand.

"Gas flame spoils the flavor. Not every smoker notices it, but I do."

She reached out, took the box of Italian wax matches. She struck one and leaned forward. As he puffed the tobacco alight, one hand slipped into her décolletage.

"I didn't think you were wearing a foundation garment."

"Oh, come on!" She blew out the match. His hand was moving gently now. "You sound like a construction engineer!"

"I apologize. You know, you're very fortunate."

She was beginning to breathe unevenly. "How . . . so?"

"Well," he began in a professorial tone, "the undercurve of a

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woman's breast is more sensitive than the top. Many aren't sufficiently well endowed to experience the difference. Not a problem you have to face."

"What," she said huskily, brushing his check, "does the book say about the bottom lip, versus the top?"

"As to that," he put the pipe on the table and leaned much, much closer, "opinion is still somewhat divided . . ."

New Year's Day came and went, as usual utterly the same as an old year's day.

It wasn't an affair, of course, but more like a fair. A continuing, wonderful, slightly mad fair, like the fair at Sorochinsk in Petroushka, but there were no puppets here. Walt never shouted at her, never had a mean word. He was unfailingly gentle, polite, considerate, with just the slightest hint of devilry to keep things spicy.

He had fewer personal idiosyncrasies than any man she'd ever met. The only thing that really seemed to bother him was any hint of nosiness on her part. A small problem, since he'd been quite candid about his background without being asked, and about his work.

She'd been a little surprised to learn about the two previous marriages, but since there were no children, nothing tying him to the past, her concern quickly vanished.

Next Tuesday was his birthday. She was determined to surprise him, but with what? Clothes? He had plenty of clothes and was no fashion plate anyway. She couldn't afford a painting of any quality. Besides, choosing art for someone was an impossible job. Electronic gadgetry, the modern adult male's equivalent of Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs, didn't excite him.

Then she thought of the tobacco. Of course! She'd have some of his special blend prepared. Whenever he lit a pipe he'd think of her.

Now, she considered, looking around the sun-dappled den, where would I hide if I were a tin of special tobacco? There must be large tins around somewhere. The lazy Susan didn't hold much and it was always full, though she never saw him replenishing it. Of course, she couldn't ask him. That would spoil the surprise.

It wasn't hidden, as it turned out; just inconspicuous, in a place she'd had no reason to go. There was a small storage room, a second bedroom, really, in the front of the beach house. It held still more books and assorted other

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things, including an expensive and unused set of golf clubs.

The tobacco tins were in an old glass cabinet off in one dark, cool corner. The case was locked, but the key was on top of the cabinet. Standing on tiptoe, she could just reach it.

Hunt as she did, though, giving each tin a thorough inspection, there was nothing one could call a special blend. There were American brands, and Turkish, Arabic, and Brazilian, and even a small, bent tin from some African country that had changed its name three times in the past ten years, but no special blends.

She closed the cabinet and put back the key. In frustration she gave the old highboy a soft kick. There was a click. The bottom foot or so of the cabinet looked like solid maple, but it wasn't, because a front panel swung out an inch or so.

She knelt, opened it all the way.

Inside, there were eight large tins on two shelves. Each was wrapped in what looked like brown rice paper or thin leather, but was neither. In fine, bold script across the front of each someone had written: SPECIAL BLEND, Prepared Especially For DR. WALTER SCOTT. Under this were the various blend names: Liz Granger, Virginia Violet, and so on.

She pulled out one tin and examined it patiently. That was all—*no address, no telephone number,* nothing. She went over each tin carefully, with identical results. Just special blend, prepared especially for . . . and the blend name. Nothing to indicate who prepared it, where it was purchased.

The paper on the final tin was slightly torn. She handled it carefully and inspected the tear. Something was stamped into the metal of the tin, almost concealed by the wrapping. Gently she peeled a little aside.

Yes, an oval stamp had been used on the tin. They probably all carried it. It was hard to make out . . . the stamp was shallow.

Peter van Eyck, The Smoke Nook . . . and an address right on Santa Monica Boulevard!

She found a little scrap of paper, wrote down the name and address. Then she smoothed the torn paper (or was it leather?) as best she could, replaced the tin on its shelf and shut the panel. It snapped closed with another click of the old-fashioned latch.

For much of its length, Santa Monica Boulevard is like the back of a movie set—a street where all

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the store fronts, you're certain, have their faces to the alleys and their backsides to the boulevard.

She was almost convinced she'd misread the address, but on the third cruise past, she spotted it. It was just a door in an old two-story building.

After parking, she found the door unlocked, the stairs inside reasonably clean. At the top of the landing she looked left, went right. She knocked on number five once and walked in. The overpowering pungent odor of tobacco hit her immediately. Bells on the door jangled for a second time as she closed it.

Someone in the back of the room said, "Just a minute!" Twice that later, there appeared the proprietor—short, fat, a fringe of hair running all around his head from chin to cheeks, into sideburns, over the ear and around back, like a cut-on-the-dotted-line demarcation. He was at least in his sixties, but most of the wrinkles were still fat wrinkles, not age wrinkles. His voice was smooth, faintly accented. He smiled.

"Well! If I had more clients like you, young lady, I might not consider retiring."

"Thanks. Anyhow," she said, "you can't retire. At least, not until tonight. I'm here to buy a birthday present for a special friend, who seems to have everything."

The owner put on a pleased expression. "What does he like, you tell me. Imported cigars? Pipe tobacco? Snuff?" He winked knowingly, an obscene elf. "Perhaps something a little more unusual? Mexican, say, or Taiwanese?"

"And the opium den in the attic." She smiled back. "No, I'm afraid not. My friend buys his tobacco from you regularly . . ."

"He has good taste."

". . . a special blend you make for him."

"My dear, I make special blends for many people, and not only here in Los Angeles. It's a fine art, and young people today . . ." He sighed. "Some of my best customers, their names would startle you. Who is your friend?"

"Dr. Walter Scott."

Smile, good-bye. Grin, vanished. Humor, to another universe.

"I see." All of a sudden, he was wary of her. "Does the doctor know that you are doing this?"

"No. I want to surprise him."

"I daresay." He looked at his feet. "I am afraid, dear lady, I cannot help you."

None of this made any sense. "Why not? Can't you just . . . blend it, or whatever else it is you do? I don't need it till next week."

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"You must understand, dear lady, that this is a very special blend. I can prepare most of it. But one ingredient always stays the same, and Dr. Scott always supplies that himself. It's like saffron in paella, you know. Without the tiny pinch of saffron, you have nothing, soup. Without the doctor's little additive . . ." He shrugged.

"Haven't you tried to find out what it is, for yourself?" she pressed.

"Of course. But the doctor, he only smiles. I don't blame him for protecting the secret of his blend. Such a marvelous sweetness it gives the smoke, I tell you!" The tobacconist shook his head, fringe bobbing. "No, I cannot help you. Excuse me." He headed for the back of the room.

"Well, I like that!" She walked out the door, paused halfway down the stairs. Odd. Oh well, she'd buy him that antique hurricane lamp he'd admired in Ports O' Call.

It was raining as she drove out to the house. Wednesdays he worked late and she was sure he could use some company. She shivered deliciously. So could she.

Pacific Coast Highway was a major artery. Thanks to the rain and fog, the number of four-wheeled corpuscles was greatly reduced tonight; typical Southern California rain—clean, cold, tamer than back East.

She let herself in quietly.

Walt was shoving another log into the fireplace. He was sucking on the usual pipe, a gargoylish meerschaum this time. After the wet run from the driveway the fire was a sensuous, delightful inferno, howling like a chained orange cat.

She took off the heavy, wet coat, strolled over to stand near the warmth. The heat was wonderful. She kissed him but this time the fire's enthusiasm wasn't matched.

"Something wrong, Walt?" She grinned. "Mrs. Norris giving you trouble about her glands again?"

"No, no, not that," he replied quietly. "Here, I made you a ginger snap."

The drink was cool and perfect as always.

"Well, tell me, then, what is it?" She went and curled up on the couch. The fire was a little too hot.

He leaned against the stone mantel, staring down into the flames. The only light in the room came from the fireplace. His face assumed biblical shadows. He sighed.

"Emma, you know what I think

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of women who stick their noses in where they shouldn't."

"Walt?" *Damn*, he must have noticed the new tear in the tobacco tin wrapping! "I don't know what you mean, darling."

The handsome profile turned to full-face. "You've been in my tobacco, haven't you?"

"Oh, all right. I confess, darling. Yes, I was in your precious hoard."

"Why?" There was more than a hint of mild curiosity in his voice. It seemed to come from another person entirely.

She pressed back into the couch and shivered. It was the sudden change in temperature from outside, of course. "Gee, Walt, I didn't think you'd be so . . . so upset."

"Why?" he repeated. His eyes weren't glowing; just the reflection from the fire, was all.

She smiled hopefully. "I was going to surprise you for your birthday. I wanted to get you some of your special blend and really surprise you. Don't think I'm going to tell you what I got you, now, either!"

He didn't smile. "I see. I take it you didn't obtain my blend?"

"No, I didn't. I went to your tobacco place . . ."

"You went to my tobacco place . . ." he echoed.

"Yes, on Santa Monica. The address was under the paper, or whatever that wrapping is." She blinked, shook herself. Was she that tired? She took another sip of the drink. It didn't help. In fact, she seemed to grow drowsier. "That nice Mr. . . . I can't remember his name . . . he . . . excuse me, Walt. Don't know why I'm so . . . sleepy."

"Continue. You went to the shop."

"Yes. The owner said he couldn't make any of your blend for me because (fog) you always brought one of the (*so* tired) ingredients yourself and he didn't know what it was. So I had to get you something else."

"Why?" he said again. Before she could answer, "Why must you all know *everything*? Each the Pandora." He took up a poker, stirred the fire. It blazed high, sparks bouncing drunkenly off the iron rod.

She finished the drink, put the glass down on the table. It seemed to waver. She leaned back against the couch.

"I'm sorry, Walt. Didn't think you'd get so . . . upset."

"It's all right, Emma."

"Funny . . . about those . . . tins. Eight of them. Two were . . . named Anna Mine and Sue deBlakely."

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"So?" He fingered the poker.

"Well," she giggled, "weren't those the . . . names of your two ex-wives?"

"I'm very sentimental, Emma."

She giggled again, frowned. Falling asleep would spoil the whole evening. Why couldn't she keep her damn eyes open? "In fact . . . all your blends had female . . . names."

"Yes." He walked over to her, stared down. His eyes seemed to burn . . . reflection from the fire again . . . and his face swam, blurred. "You're falling asleep, Emma." He moved her empty glass carefully to one end of the table. It was good crystal.

"Can't . . . unnerstand it. So . . . tired . . ."

"Maybe you should take a little rest, Emma. A good rest."

"Rest . . . maybe . . ."

His arms cradled her. "Lie here, Emma. Next to the fire. It'll warm you." He put her down on the carpet across from the fronting brick. The flames pranced hellishly, anxiously, searing the red-hot brick interior to an inferno.

"Warm . . . hot, Walt," she mumbled sleepily. Her voice was thick uncertain. "Lower it?"

"No, Emma." He took the poker, jabbed and pushed the logs back against the rear of the fireplace. Funny, she'd never noticed how big it was, for such a modest house.

Her eyes closed. There was silence for several minutes. As he bent and touched her, they fluttered open again, just a tiny bit.

"Walt . . ." Her voice was barely audible and he had to lean close to hear.

"Yes?"

"What . . . special ingredient . . . ?"

There was a sigh before he could reply and her eyes closed again. He tossed two more logs on the fire, adjusted them on the iron. Then he knelt, grabbed her under the arms. Her breathing was shallow, faint.

He put his mouth close to her ear and whispered: "Ashes, my love. Ashes."

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According to legend, St. George slew the dragon all right, but then, aren't saints sacrosanct?

Eye of the Dragon

The leaves crackled under Kevin Foley's very tired feet as he strode up the walk. Autumn, and people were just beginning to comment on how early evening was coming these days. Just after six, and the lights beaming through the curtain-framed windows gave the house a warm glow.

Raymond, Mindy's younger brother, answered the door. He was a skinny kid in his late teens, with long, straight black hair which he was constantly brushing out of his eyes. "She's upstairs, doing her nails or something," he said. "C'mon in."

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Kevin followed Raymond into the kitchen to wait.

"Beer?" Raymond offered.

"No, thanks," Kevin said, taking a seat.

Raymond pulled out a knife and a misshapen lump of wood.

"Taken up whittling, have you?"

Raymond smiled. "Trying to. I figure I've got the knife, so what the hell, I might as well use it."

"You want to be careful with that thing. One slip and you'll find your thumb on the floor."

"Take a look," Raymond said, handing it to Kevin.

"Nice."

"Look at the handle." A dragon was painted on the side, a plastic red "jewel" for an eye.

"This is one stylish knife."

"It's imported," Raymond said, taking it back.

"Say, do you mind if I take off my shoes?" Kevin asked. "I've been walking all day."

"Go right ahead."

Kevin eased his loafers off and massaged his toes with a relieved sigh. "Did a lot of leg work today," he explained.

"Get a scoop?"

"No," Kevin replied, "kind of a cornball human interest story. About some guy with only one hand who plays golf in the low eighties. If I'm lucky it'll be hidden someplace in section two tomorrow."

"It must be a thrill seeing your writing in print."

"It has its rewards," Kevin said. "Where's your mom?"

"She's out-of-town, visiting a cousin in Detroit."

"So you and Mindy are fending for yourselves."

"Yup," said Raymond, whittling in a desultory manner. "Where are you guys going tonight?"

"I don't know," Kevin said. "Maybe we'll take in a movie. There's a Russian film version of *Uncle Vanya* I've heard a lot of good things about."

"With subtitles, I bet."

"I guess so."

"I stick to American," Raymond said. "Seems to me, if you read the words you miss the picture, and if you watch the picture you miss the words, so I stick to American."

"What about you? You going somewhere tonight?"

"No," Raymond said. "There isn't much happening in the neighborhood."

"You could drive into the city."

"I guess you haven't heard."

"Heard what?" Kevin asked.

"My license was suspended. I was caught letting Augie Marshall drive."

"What's wrong with that?"

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"Augie Marshall doesn't have a license. Either," he added as an afterthought, and he shrugged.

"That's tough luck."

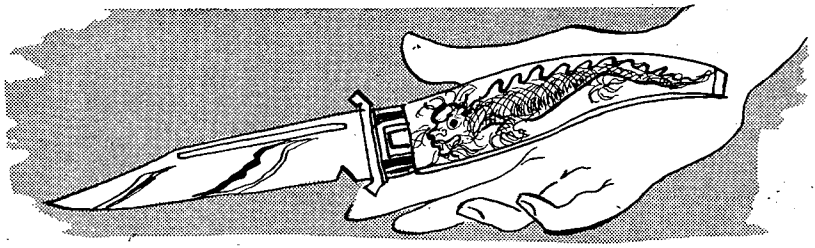
"What is that delicate aroma?" asked Mindy, spotting Kevin's shoeless feet.

"I took a shower and changed my socks before I came here," Kevin said.

house. He sighed and closed the door.

"Your brother shows every sign of becoming what is referred to in quaint parlance as a ne'er-do-well," Kevin said. They were sitting in a coffee shop after *Uncle Vanya.*

"What is that in non-quaint parlance, a bum?"



"Just kidding," she answered, kissing him on the forehead. "Your toeses smell like roses."

"Please, don't be cute," said Kevin, putting on his shoes. "If I want cute I'll read *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy* or turn on Art Linkletter."

"And what has Art Linkletter done to you that you should turn on him?"

"Enough," Kevin said, swatting her on the rump. "Come here and give me a grown-up kiss."

"Don't mind me," said Raymond, grinning.

"I won't," Mindy said. It was a very grown-up kiss.

"Have a good time," Raymond called after them as they left the

"He always seems to be getting into trouble," Kevin said. "Getting tossed out of school, busted for pot, and now this business of his losing his license . . ."

"I thought you liked him," she said, and the way she said it, it was clear that it was very important to her that he did.

"Oh, I like him," Kevin reassured her, "but he does seem to have more than his share of bad breaks. He's what? Nineteen?"

"Not till February."

"All right, eighteen. I was earning a living when I was eighteen. What about him? What is he planning to do? Or does he have any plans beyond whittling with that silly knife of his?"

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"You know he admires you very much," Mindy said.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"He says he thinks he'd like to try reporting."

Kevin shook his head. "I *told* you he's going to be a ne'er-do-well."

Mindy laughed, which is one of the things you do when you are crazy in love with someone; laugh at their jokes even if they are a little thin.

"To be serious," Kevin said, "he can't expect just to walk into the *Times* and become a Jack Anderson or Seymour Hersch. The days when illiterates like me can get hired are long gone. These days they expect a college degree, preferably in journalism. You can't get a degree if you don't stick it four years in school."

"Will you talk to him and tell him what you told me?"

"Nothing I've said is any great secret."

"No, but coming from you, it might make a difference," Mindy said. "Like I say, he admires you very much."

"Sure, I'll talk to him. You love him a lot, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Maybe a little more than you love me?"

"Are you jealous?"

"Not really," Kevin told her. "He's my brother. The way I love you and the way I love him are totally different."

"I certainly hope so," Kevin said, putting his arm around her.

She leaned against him and played with the buttons on his jacket. "Actually, there's no comparison," she continued. "I shouldn't have made a comparison because there is none. It's natural that I feel very close to him. What with Dad dying when we were kids and Mom having to get a nine-to-fiver, a lot of the responsibility for raising Raymond fell on me."

"Both sister and mother, huh?"

"Something like that." Was there the slightest hint of guilt in her voice, as if there were something wrong in what she was revealing?

"Hey," he said, "it was foolish of me to bring up the subject. Let's forget it, OK?"

"You know how I feel about you," she said, her hand slipping under his coat.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said, knowing full well what she was doing. "If you don't stop tickling me, I'm going to start giggling, and there are few things more ridiculous than a grown man giggling."

They kissed, and once again she leaned against him, but very

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quietly. He stroked her auburn hair softly, gently, and for a long time they didn't speak.

Then she said, "You do understand about Raymond, don't you?"

He said he did, and he meant it, but he felt uneasy somehow. "It's getting late," he told her. "I'd better get you home."

Mindy was changing for bed when she heard the car pull into the garage behind the house. Putting on a robe and slippers, she shuffled to the kitchen, arriving just as Raymond came shambling in through the back door.

"Hullo, Sis," he said, making what he fancied was a very sober face to match the calculatedly sober tone of his voice, which only served to accentuate his inebriation. With great care he settled himself into a chair.

"You crazy fool," she said. "Driving without a license, and drunk on top of it."

"Drunk?" he replied, his eyes wide in mock amazement. "Who's drunk? Are you drunk? Sis, have you been hitting the old bottle, lapping up the sauce?" He shook his head. "Shame, shame." His face broke into a rascally grin.

"Raymond—" she began.

"I'm sorry," he interrupted. "I'm not just saying that. I'm truly sorry. I did something I shouldn't have and you're right and I'm very sorry. It won't happen again, I promise."

"And saying that is supposed to make everything all right again, is that it?" She sat down across from him.

"Sis, what do you want from me?"

"A little responsibility. For heaven's sake, Raymond, you're too old to be playing stunts like this."

"I know, I know, and I'm ashamed of myself." His elbow on the table, he cradled his head in his hand and said, "Will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you?" she echoed. "It's not up to me to forgive you. You aren't hurting me when you act like this," she lied, "you're hurting yourself."

"Nevertheless, do you forgive me?"

She looked at him, so earnest, yet there was something mocking in his earnestness, something irrefutably ingratiating. She looked away and sighed. "Yes, yes, I forgive you."

"You won't tell Mom, will you?"

"No, I won't tell Mom."

"Thanks, Sis," he said, and he rose and walked around the table to kiss her on the cheek. "You're a pal, you know that?"

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"That's me," she said, "one of the guys."

He smiled and headed for the door, but stopped before he reached it, snapping his fingers as if he'd forgotten something. "There's just one other thing," he said.

"There's more?"

"Well, uh . . . yeah. What it is, is that there's kind of a . . . well, I guess you could call it a dent."

"A dent?"

"On the, you know, car?"

"You dented the car?"

"Not the whole car. Just one part. Just a little. Just the fender part. Anyway, I was wondering—"

"If I would take the blame for it when Mom asks, right?"

"That's real fine of you, Sis."

"Raymond, I did not say I would."

"Won't you?"

She grimaced.

"Mindy," he said, "I swear to you it wasn't my fault. This old geezer, he backed into me. Half-blind like that, they shouldn't let him drive. I swear that's the truth. Honest." He raised his hand in a casual version of the Boy Scout salute.

"All right, I'll cover for you," she said, "this time."

"Thanks, Sis. You're a—"

"I know, a pal."

He smiled and went to his room. She watched him go. After a second she got up to go to bed.

A three o'clock call rousted Kevin out of the bed into which he had collapsed only a half hour before, after taking Mindy home.

"Foley?"

"Yeah?"

"Get your tail over to Grand and Kagan. Looks like murder."

"Why me? Where's Lubkemann?"

"Lubkemann's down with the flu and you're the man closest to the scene, so get to work."

He pulled his trousers on over his pajamas, grabbed his notebook and a fresh pack of cigarettes and piled into his car.

The intersection of Grand and Kagan was crowded with police cars. Curious locals stood behind the barricades or in clusters on their front porches or peered from behind the curtains in their bedroom windows.

Foley flipped out his press credentials and was admitted to the area. He saw the flash of the police photographer's camera and walked toward it. He spotted Lieutenant Tolston and nodded.

"Foley," the lieutenant acknowledged. "Where's Lubkemann?"

"Down with the flu. What can you tell me?"

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"Name was Margaret Hutcheson. Fifty-three years old. A history teacher at Kennedy High School. That's just a few blocks away, at Cedar and Ridge."

"I know it," Foley said.

"Approximately twenty-five minutes ago, it seems she was struck by a hit-and-run driver going south down Kagan. Now, here's the pretty part. It looks like whoever rammed her got out of the car and finished the job with this," and Tolson showed him a knife with a dragon painted on the side. The eye sparkled red under the street lamp.

"Kevin, what are you calling about at this hour?"

"Mindy, uh, something's happened . . ."

"You aren't hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. It's . . . Listen, I have to ask you a couple of questions."

"Kevin, why have you called?"

"Mindy, please, I have to know—did Raymond go out tonight?"

"Yes," she said. "Why do you want to know that?"

"Did he drive?"

"He's lost his license. He told you."

"That's not what I asked," he said. "Don't hedge with me. This is very important. Did Raymond take the car anywhere tonight?"

"What if he did?"

Kevin didn't answer.

"Kevin," she demanded, "what is this all about? What did Raymond— What do you *think* Raymond did?"

"There's a Miss Hutcheson," he replied slowly. "She was run down by a car."

"There are millions of cars," Mindy said. "What makes you think it was ours?"

"Let me finish. She was stabbed, too. After she was hit by the car. The police think that the same man who hit her stopped and went back and stabbed her. They found the knife. It looks like Raymond's."

"No," she said. "It couldn't be. Raymond couldn't have."

"I'm not saying he did it. I'm just saying the knife looks like Raymond's. I saw it, Mindy."

She felt as if something were crumpling inside her chest. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

"Have you told the police?"

"Not yet. I thought I'd better call you first. There's one thing that could put Raymond in the clear. Find out if he still has his knife. If he does, then it's a coincidence and we don't have anything to worry about."

"All right," she said, "I'll ask

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him." She was surprised how calm she was.

"I'll stay on the line," Kevin said.

Mindy set down the receiver and knocked on Raymond's door.

"C'mon in," he said, and she opened it to find him in bed, raised up on one elbow, having just turned on the lamp by his bed.

"Hey, Sis, what's all the commotion?"

"Where's your knife?"

"My knife? Oh, it's around here somewhere."

"Would you get it, please? I have to see it."

"Tell you the truth, Sis, I've misplaced it. I haven't got the faintest idea where it is."

"Then it's true," she said, sitting down at the foot of the bed, her eyes closed.

"What's true?" Raymond asked innocently.

"Miss Hutcheson."

He raised his eyebrows. "So quickly," he said.

"How did it happen?" she asked.

"Well, I was driving down Kagan, you see, when out of the blue, she just darts in front of the car. I hit my brakes, but it was too late, the car knocked her down. Not my fault, Sis, I swear. She just darted in front of the car. Anyway, I got out to see what I could do. I figured I would do what I could, then make an anonymous phone call to the police and she would be taken care of."

"Why an anonymous call?"

"Sis, come on. I was in a lousy position. Driving without a license, hitting someone after I'd had a couple of drinks. They'd throw the book at me, even if it weren't my fault, which it wasn't.

"But the thing is, she recognized me. She was my teacher at Kennedy, you remember. She was still conscious and when I went over to help her, she said my name. I panicked, and the knife was in my pocket—"

"So you stabbed her."

"I panicked. If I had it to do over—"

"Yeah," Mindy said, and left the room.

Returning to the phone, she said, "Hello, Kevin?"

"What took you so long?"

"We, uh, we had to go out to the car. He left it in the glove compartment."

"You mean you saw the knife?"

"Yes," she said, "it was in the glove compartment, like I said. So, everything's all right. We don't have to worry."

"That's good news," he said lamely.

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"So there's no point in your calling the police, right?"

There was a pause. "Uh, Mindy, listen, I think, just to be on the safe side—"

"Kevin, why bother them? I saw the knife with my own two eyes. There's no chance Raymond could have done it. You'd only be causing trouble for everyone. Don't you see?"

"It's not that simple," he said.

"But it *is*," she said. "Kevin, do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Then please, for my sake, don't make that call."

"Mindy, you don't understand—"

"Listen," she said, "I'm on my way over. Will you make me a promise that you won't call until I get there?"

"Mindy . . ."

"Kevin, will you promise me that?"

He hesitated. "All right," he finally said. "I'll wait till you get here," and he hung up.

The doorbell rang and Kevin put down the instant coffee he had just started to spoon into a cup, and went to the front door. "Mindy," he said, as he opened the door.

It wasn't Mindy. It was Raymond. In his hands was a carving knife. It had no dragon on the side, no shiny red eye, but it was just as deadly.

Returning to the house, Raymond knocked on his sister's door. Early morning light was just seeping through her window. She was sitting in a chair in the corner, her arms folded tightly around herself. She looked at him.

"It's done," he told her.

Her head slumped forward.

"I'm sorry, Sis. I really am."

"Please," she said, "leave me."

"You know I liked him . . ."

"Please," she said.

He did as she asked.

Alone now, with the full realization of what had happened, she began to cry softly. Kevin and Raymond; she had loved them both—but when forced to make a choice . . .

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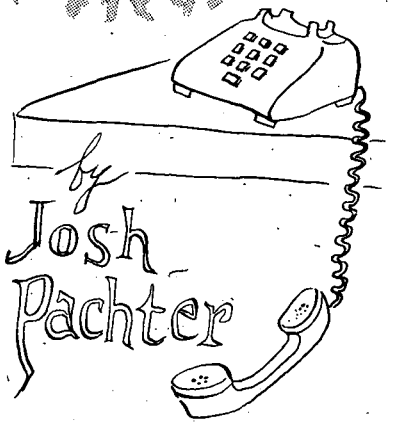
A little redundancy makes the puzzle more interesting.

Gemini



by Josh Pachter

It never failed. Allen worked the four-to-midnight trick and, as usual, at one minute to twelve the damn telephone rang. Just once, just one time, he'd like to get out of the squad room when he was supposed to, go home and have a drink and fall into bed early enough to grab a decent night's sleep. Just *once*, was that too much to ask?

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The phone shrilled again, and he scowled and stretched out a hand for it. "Twelfth Precinct," he said. "Detective Allen."

At the other end of the line, someone was breathing hoarsely into the mouthpiece.

Crank, Allen thought immediately, frowning, but before he could bang down the receiver in disgust, some inner sense warned him to listen more carefully.

The breathing was heavy, uneven, gasping.

"Hello?" Allen said. "Who is this?"

"Cam-Campbell." The voice was old and weak, nothing more than a cracked whisper.

This guy is dying, Allen realized. As if he had read the thought and wanted to confirm it, the old man at the other end of the line swallowed noisily and croaked, "Murder. Been shot."

Allen grabbed a pencil. "What's your address, Mr. Campbell? I'll get an ambulance there quick as I can."

"No use," Campbell gasped. "Die—any minute."

"Who did it? Who shot you?"

"Gemini," the old man sighed. "Gemini."

There was a loud clatter as the telephone receiver dropped from Campbell's hand, and then there was silence.

According to the directory, there were eleven Campbells living in the Twelfth Precinct. Byrnes, Allen's relief man, showed up just as he finished the first call, and between them they dialed the other ten listings in less than five minutes.

Ten of the Campbells they phoned were at home and alive. The other number was busy. That, then, was where an old man had not had time to cradle his receiver before dying.

Byrnes told Allen to go on home, but Allen grumbled that maybe he'd better come along, since he was the one who'd taken the call.

The house was a big one, set in the middle of several acres of trees over on the exclusive south side of town. The patrol car's tires crunched gravel as Byrnes braked at the end of the long driveway.

Except for the two colonial-style lamps that flanked the front door, the house was dark. The butler who answered their ring looked like he'd been gotten out of bed, which he probably had. "Yes?" he said blearily, and then Allen flashed his shield and said, "Police officers," and the servant said, "Yes?" again, only this time wide-awake.

"This the Campbell residence?" Allen asked.

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The butler nodded, his eyes suspicious.

"Where's Mr. Campbell?"

He's asleep, sir. Is there anything wrong?"

Byrnes stepped into the house. "Would you show us to his bedroom, please?"

"Mr. Campbell will not like being awakened in the middle of the night," the butler told them, dropping the "sir."

The detectives were silent.

The butler raised an eyebrow, shrugged almost imperceptibly, and walked off. They followed him.

Campbell's bedroom was on the second floor of the house. The room was empty. The bed had not been slept in.

"Well?" Byrnes asked.

"He *could* be in the library," the butler suggested slowly. "He's almost always asleep by this time, but . . ."

They went back downstairs. The library door was closed, but not locked. Inside, Allen groped for a wall switch and flicked on a light.

Across the room from them, Geoffrey Campbell sat slumped over his desk. His thin gray hair was tousled, his expressionless face a pasty white. A jagged red circle stained the back of his striped nightshirt, and there was a small black hole in the center of the stain. A .45 caliber automatic lay next to the dead man's right hand.

There was a pale-blue push-button telephone on the desk, too, and its receiver dangled from the end of its cord, halfway to the floor. A high-pitched tone was sounding from the earpiece. Byrnes crossed the room and cradled it. Then he wrapped a handkerchief around his hand, picked up the gun and sniffed the end of its barrel. The smell of burnt cordite stung his nostrils. "This is it," he nodded. "Fired recently."

Allen glanced around the room. Then he turned to the staring butler and said, "You. What's your name?"

"Doyle, sir." The man's eyes never left Campbell's body.

"Who else is in this house now, Doyle?"

"There's just Mrs. Campbell and the two boys, sir."

"Well, wake them up and get them down here. Fast."

"Gemini," Allen said, when Doyle had torn his eyes away from his master's corpse and left the room.

"Gemini," Byrnes repeated.

Mrs. Campbell followed Doyle into the library, a man in his early thirties at her side—one of the

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"boys," apparently. The dead man's wife was in her mid-fifties, probably five or ten years younger than her husband had been. Even at this hour, having just been awakened, she was an attractive woman. Her hair was dyed a soft brown, her skin was smooth except for the faint beginnings of crow's-feet at the corners of her eyes. When she saw her husband's body she gasped, and her hands flew up to her mouth. Then, almost gently, she began to tremble, and the trembling built up until her body was shaking violently, and she was sobbing.

The son put an arm around her shoulders and whispered softly to her. He was shaken himself, though, and his ruggedly handsome face betrayed conflicting emotions: first, anger at the intrusion, then confusion and grief at the sight of his father, finally, concern for his mother.

"We're terribly sorry, ma'am," Allen said. "I'm Detective Allen, and this is Detective Byrnes. We—"

"Burns and Allen," the woman giggled. "That's very funny, Richard. Burns and Allen."

"Shh, Mother," Richard Campbell said, holding her tightly. "Shh."

"I don't understand," she whispered. "Why did he do it? Why did he want to kill himself?"

Allen cleared his throat. "Your husband didn't commit suicide, Mrs. Campbell. He was murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Yes, ma'am," Byrnes told her. "He was shot in the back. He couldn't possibly have held the gun at the right angle by himself, so someone else must have shot him. Besides, just before he died he phoned us and told Detective Allen here he'd been murdered."

"But who would—who'd want to kill Dad?" Richard said blankly.

"Somebody did. Didn't any of you hear the shot?"

"Mr. Campbell had this room soundproofed several years ago, sir," Doyle explained.

"I see." Then, suddenly, Allen turned to Richard Campbell. "What month were you born?" he asked.

Richard stared at him. "What *month* was I born? What does that have to do with—"

"When your father called, I asked him who had shot him. He didn't answer with a name, but mentioned one of the signs of the zodiac instead. Maybe he was telling me the astrological sign of his killer."

"Yes," Mrs. Campbell said softly, "that would be just like Geoff. He was an avid mystery-

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story buff, and he was always making cryptic remarks and expecting us to figure out what he meant by them."

Richard chewed thoughtfully on his lower lip. "Yeah, that's the type of thing Dad might pull," he said at last, "even when he was dying. It was a kind of game of his—drove us crazy sometimes, but we always tried to indulge him. Detective stories were his big passion. This must have been too good an opportunity for him to pass up. All he had to do was tell you the name of his murderer, but he went and turned it into one of those dying messages he was always reading about."

"Well, Mr. Campbell?" Byrnes said.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes. I was born in February. What sign did Dad say?"

Byrnes ignored him. "And you, ma'am?"

"Me? In May—I was born in May."

"What date in May, Mrs. Campbell?" Allen asked gently.

"The fifteenth."

Byrnes sighed. "Well, that seems to let both of you out. The zodiac sign your husband mentioned was Gemini, which runs from May twenty-second to June twenty-first. May fifteenth would be Taurus, and February is either Aquarius or Pisces. What sign was your other son born under, Mrs. Campbell?"

"Who's asking?" Edward Campbell said sullenly, as he slouched into the library. "And what are all you people doing here in the middle of the—" Then he saw his father's body, and his jaw dropped open and he breathed, "Oh, what happened?"

At the same instant, Detective Allen's jaw dropped, too; because, although Edward had taken the time to dress while Richard was still disheveled from sleep, it was obvious that the two Campbell brothers were identical twins.

"Gemini," Allen said, almost to himself. "The sign of the twins."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Edward demanded.

Byrnes snapped his fingers. "Sure!" he exclaimed. "They were in it together. They shot him and left him for dead, but the old man had enough strength left in him to phone the police. He was afraid he'd die before he could say both of their names, though, so he just said the one word, Gemini, figuring as soon as we saw his sons were twins, we'd know he meant they both killed him."

"*We* killed him!" Edward exploded. "You're out of your mind!"

"We all *loved* Dad," Richard

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said firmly. "Sure, we had our arguments, just like any family, but never anything serious."

"We'll find the motive," Byrnes smiled. "All I know is, your father said the one word, Gemini, before he died, and here are you two, exactly alike."

"Except Geoffrey Campbell *didn't* just say one word," Allen said slowly.

"What?"

"He said *two* words: *Gemini, Gemini.*"

"Well, yeah, he was just repeating it to make sure you heard it right!"

Allen shook his head. "That's what I assumed at the time, but I was wrong. Geoffrey Campbell said the word Gemini twice on purpose."

"Meaning what?" Byrnes frowned.

"It's simple, really, if you just remember Campbell was a big mystery fan. In the zodiac, Gemini is the sign of the twins, right? So if Gemini is the sign of *two*, then Gemini Gemini must be the sign of *four*. And as every serious detective story reader knows, *The Sign of the Four* is the name of a novel written by Sir Arthur Conan—"

"Hold it, Doyle!" Byrnes barked. "You make another move toward that gun, and I'll shoot."

"I still can't quite believe it," Allen said, after they had taken Doyle down to the precinct house and booked him.

"Can't believe what?" Byrnes asked.

"That Doyle killed him."

"Why not? From what he said in his statement, it seems pretty clear. The old man caught him pinching a bottle of booze from the liquor cabinet and gave him two weeks' notice. Doyle couldn't face the blow to his reputation, so he pulled Campbell's gun out of the desk drawer and shot him."

"That's not what I meant." Allen grinned. "I've been on the force for nearly twenty-three years now, and this is the first time I ever handled a case where it really *was* the butler who did it."

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Should one say that a premise of personal invulnerability is an adjunct of sophistic reasoning—or of stupidity?

Everybody's Victim

by FRANK SISK

It was a perfect morning in May and the sky, a deep azure, was delicately streaked with fine tendrils of white cloud. L. T. Swacker moved smoothly under it in a cream-colored convertible, the top down. The highway speed was posted at 65. He was exceeding it by 15 miles per hour. That was L. T. Swacker's style, passing everything on the road, showing everybody his tail.

Affixed to his round pinkish face were a large Cuban cigar and a smile of smug satisfaction. Occasionally his piggish eyes shifted behind the dark glasses to scan the rear-view mirror. He didn't want a state trooper taking him by surprise. He could fix a lot of things here and there, but he didn't want to waste his clout on

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anything so trivial as a ticket for speeding.

From the radio the 11 o'clock news issued.

"Henry Kissinger briefly outlined plans for . . . A spreading oil slick endangers a vast . . . The skyjacker has threatened to detonate a bomb unless . . . Sniper fire from the rooftop has already wounded . . ."

L. T. Swacker did not hear much of it. Instead, he was listening with a worried frown to a low-pitched grinding sound that had just developed somewhere in the underside of the car. It seemed to come from the rear.

The muffler maybe? The universal joint? Or the damned differential?

He checked the odometer. The reading was 12174.7. Here is $8,500 worth of streamlined automotive engineering, he told himself, hardly broken in yet and already making a noise worse than an old cement mixer. Oh, those lousy Detroit jokers.

The grinding grew ominously louder. Something sounded on the verge of exploding or falling apart.

Swacker removed his heavy foot from the accelerator and began to exert careful pressure on the brake pedal. He was nearly down to 60 when all hell broke loose. The harsh grinding changed to a high metallic screech immediately followed by a series of dull thuds. The car shivered. Swacker hit the brake pedal hard. The car veered into the left lane, heading toward the median divider. A pickup truck, about to pass, burned rubber with a shrill squeal and then protested with a long angry blast of its horn.

Swacker answered obscenely.

At last he got the convertible under tense control and maneuvered it gradually into the lane next to the guardrail. He brought it to a stop 50 yards from an exit ramp near a sign that read EMERGENCY PARKING ONLY.

"Damn!" he said, removing the mangled cigar from his mouth and exhaling. "That was one helluva close one."

After a minute he climbed from the car, keeping a wary eye on the traffic zooming by, and edged his way around to the rear. He expected to see the mechanical bowels of the car hanging out and dragging. Such was not the case. In fact, his inexperienced eye spotted nothing visibly wrong until he squatted down on his plump haunches. Then he noticed that the left rear was toed out from the axle and that long smoky shreds of rubber were clinging to the wheel well. The tire was

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badly chewed up; thoroughly shot.

Heaving himself upright, he surveyed the area for help. A service station stood a short distance from the end of the exit ramp. "I guess that's got to be it," he muttered.

Swacker got back into the car. Leaning toward the passenger side, he stripped a length of transparent tape from the edge of the white sun visor. A slit appeared in the leatherette fabric and sagged open. Swacker inserted a pudgy thumb and forefinger and extracted a business-size manila envelope, which he folded and placed in his right hip pocket. From the glove compartment he took a small tape dispenser and resealed the gap in the sun visor.

Swacker required better than 20 minutes to walk the mile-long loop of the exit ramp. The unaccustomed exercise left him short of breath and temper. He greeted the long-haired kid who lounged in the open doorway of the service station with a peremptory statement. "I see you got a wrecker."

"We sure do," the kid said, remaining spinelessly in place.

"I got a car needs a lift and tow."

"Whereabouts?"

"Other side of Exit Fourteen. Up there on the Interstate." Swacker waved a hand vaguely in the direction from which he'd come.

"What happened?" the kid asked, as if prepared to begin a long discussion on the subject.

"That's for you to tell me," Swacker retorted. "I want you to go up there and get the car and bring it down here and look it over. And then I want you to tell me what happened."

"I ain't a mechanic," the kid said.

"You got a sign right beside you says a mechanic's on duty here all the time."

"That means the boss."

"Well, where the hell is he?"

"Across the street for coffee."

"Go get him. Tell him he's got a customer's in a hurry."

"He'll be back any minute by himself."

"You don't compreny too good, do you, kid? I said I'm in a hurry. So get the lead out before I let you taste my toe."

"No need to throw your weight around, mister."

"That crack'll cost you extra, kid, unless you start moving like a track hound."

"Here comes the boss now," the kid said.

The boss was a lanky redhead, gaunt of face, with black oily pustules dotting the wrinkles of his pale forehead. He said he would

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go and get Swacker's car for $25.

"You got a deal," Swacker said. "Where's a phone I can use?"

"That booth over there's for the public," the redhead said.

"That'll do. Can you change a buck?"

"Louie'll change it. Change it, Louie, a buck for this gent."

Armed with three quarters, two dimes and a nickel, Swacker wedged his fat frame inside the phone booth just as the wrecker left the yard. He dialed the operator and gave her a number. She told him to deposit 65 cents and began ringing.

Marvin's unmistakable voice answered with a husky advertisement: "Premier truck and auto rentals. Lowest rates around. Cash or—"

"Cut the commercial, Marvin. This is Leo."

"Leo Swacker?"

"That's right. Leo T. Swacker. How the hell many Leos you do business with, Marvin?"

"Just one. And that's too much."

"You're too much yourself, Marvin. Overcome that negative outlook. Take my advice."

"All right, Leo. So what's on your mind?"

"I need a car."

"You and me both."

"What's that supposed to mean, Marvin?" Swacker asked.

"Means every vehicle in the lot is out."

"Don't schmaltz around, Marvin. So I owe you a few hundred lousy bucks—"

"Eight hundred twenty-nine lousy bucks."

"I clear up everything the first of the year."

"You and Fu Manchu. That dough could be working for me out on the street."

"It's working for me instead."

"Leo, you are a no-good welsher."

"Okay, Marvin, you win. My check goes in the mail to you tomorrow."

"I'll believe it when I cash it."

"Tomorrow. Now let's get back to business."

"I only got through telling you I can't do business. I got no wheels to do business with. Even if I wanted to. And I don't."

"What about your own vehicle, Marvin? Or are you using roller skates today?"

"My own vehicle?"

"That's what I said."

"Are you really serious, Leo?"

"I'm serious and I'm in a hurry. So how about it?"

"For cry sake, Leo. I got a business to run."

"You just told me you're temporary outa business, Marvin. So

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here's my advice. Get in your vehicle right away and drive down here and get me. Otherwise—and listen good, Marvin old buddy—otherwise I send that print of you and that blonde cutie to your everloving wife."

"I bought that print from you a year ago."

"I had another made up."

"Where the hell are you, Leo?" Swacker told him.

"It'll take me an hour to get there."

"I'll be waiting, Marvin."

As soon as Swacker hung up, the phone rang. It was the operator wanting an additional 20 cents. He told her what she'd have to do to get it and squeezed himself from the booth, leaving the receiver dangling.

Ten minutes later the wrecker arrived with the convertible hoisted by the rear, and the left rear wheel missing.

"That wheel just fell off when I began lifting," the redhead explained, climbing from the cab. "I tossed it in the truck, but it's all shot."

"Much other damage?"

"Plenty." The redhead seemed to relish the fact. "We can write off the brake drums. They've had it. And the pinion bearings, they look like they're welded to the axle housing. You're lucky to be alive, mister. There's a crack in the differential cover, I'm pretty sure, which means the rear U-joint assembly is all—"

"Don't talk Greek to me, Red," Swacker said. "Tell me what caused the trouble?"

"Who knows? Practically a new car. Probably some hung-over inspector at the factory."

"I guess Nader's no nut."

"Or it could be—no, forget it."

"I won't forget it. Speak up."

"Okay. Maybe somebody tampered with the rear wheel."

"What makes you say that?"

"I had a case like it the other day. Man comes in here with a shimmy in his front wheel. New car. I look it over. What do I find? I find somebody's removed all the lugs except one from the front left. The man begins to think back and comes to the conclusion that this might be the work of the kid in the lot where he parks his car every day. The kid had been acting kind of fresh, so the man stops tipping him a few weeks ago. He figures this might be the kid's way of sending a signal. No proof, of course, but there it is."

Swacker mulled it over until Marvin arrived.

Before departing he gave Red his unlisted phone number, saying he could be reached there be-

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tween eight and nine any morning of the week, and Red said he would call as soon as the convertible was ready to roll, which could be the day after tomorrow if all the parts were available locally.

"Back to the city?" Marvin asked sullenly as Swacker got into the car.

"That's right, Marvin. Front Street. I'm running behind the clock, so step on it."

"Don't tell me you expect me to drive you around all day on your lousy errands."

"Front Street's all for today, Marvin."

"Well, that's good news."

"Then you can drive me home."

"A pleasure, Leo."

"And tomorrow you can pick me up at nine sharp."

"The hell I will."

"The hell you won't. If you want that print."

"How many prints you got, Leo? That's what I want to know. I can't work for those damn prints the rest of my life."

"This one's the last one."

"How can I count on that?"

"You got my word, Marvin."

"In my book, Leo, your word ain't worth a damn."

Marvin's a Grade-A sorehead, Swacker reflected. Never been anything else. Making the rounds in this kind of work, you run into the type all the time. Most of them are praying for the day when somebody'll sink a shiv in your ribs. *Somebody.* Not them, of course, because they were all gutless wonders.

"What happened to your own vehicle?" Marvin asked after a long silence.

"A rear wheel come loose," Swacker said.

"Sounds dangerous, Leo."

"I'm lucky to be alive."

Momentarily an expression of disappointment passed across Marvin's face. When they reached the city, he asked, "What section of Front Street you want?"

"The five-twenty block," Swacker said.

"Nice neighborhood, Leo."

"Looks can be deceiving, Marvin. All the bread ain't stashed in fancy mansions."

"I believe it, Leo."

In the five-twenty block Swacker directed Marvin to pull over to the curb near a twisted and rusting NO PARKING OR LOADING sign outside a six-story building of red brick that appeared to be long abandoned.

"Wharf-rat hotel," Marvin said, distastefully studying the grimy facade, the broken windows. "Want me to wait here?"

"No, Marvin. Drive around the

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block. I'll meet you on the next street over. Dewey Street."

"How long'll you be?"

"Not long. Ten minutes at the most."

Swacker heaved himself from the car and waddled casually toward the dirty green door that was the entrance to the decaying building. He glanced up and down the street, which was deserted except for an alley cat parked on the crumbling curb and an old woman scrounging through an overturned barrel in mid-block, and then he quickly opened the green door and shut it behind him.

A little man met him in the dimly-lighted hallway and escorted him like a thin brown shadow to the freight elevator standing at one end of an empty vaulting room that smelled of a century of dust.

"You leetle late," the man said as they rose slowly on the creaking elevator.

"Had an accident," Swacker said.

"Many have them."

Swacker didn't bother to reply. The man had a rep for meanness. No sense rubbing the little scab the wrong way. He was a hophead and always carried a knife.

The elevator groaned to a halt at the sixth floor. The man didn't get off. Swacker did and was joined almost immediately by a bearded man with a twitching right eye.

"Ozzie's champing, L. T.," the beard said.

"All you friendly neighborhood pushers are always champing when you ain't nodding," Swacker said, lodging a cigar in his mouth.

"He doesn't like to hang out here longer than necessary," the beard said, eye twitching as if in further explanation. "Fuzz. Narcs. Coming out of the cracks, man."

"I just as soon be dealing with Ozzie in the Hilton," Swacker said. "But I hear they banned him."

The beard emitted a humorless cackle and his eye twitched rapidly.

They passed from the barren, hollow-sounding corridor into a dusty room. Ozzie sat there on an old wire-backed soda-fountain stool at a table created by laying a sheet of plywood across two sawhorses. There was a filthy rug covering that part of the warped floor occupied by Ozzie. Ozzie's dog, an overweight Saint Bernard if Swacker ever saw one, lay at his feet, apparently sleeping. Against the noontime light streaming through the corroded grating on the fire-escape door Ozzie's thin face looked dead-white as

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usual, and his hair a shiny black.

"Greetings, L. T.," he murmured as if in deference to the sleeping dog. "I hope you brought something."

"Do I ever fail?" Swacker said.

"First things first, L. T. What you got?"

"You got the bread. I got the henry."

"I hope your henry's as good as my bread."

"Amen," added the beard.

"What you driving at, Ozzie?" Swacker asked with a slight effort at indignation.

"That last henry was kind of sugared out. I got a lot of consumer complaints. A lot of them, L. T., and some of them mighty mean."

"What do them muscle shooters know?"

"They know how to de-muscle a man who shorts them. They know that much."

"Amen," from the beard again.

"No worry with this, Ozzie," Swacker said, taking the folded manila envelope from his hip pocket and tapping it twice lightly on the plywood. "This stuff is twenty percent pure."

"It better be. I'm getting ways to test it."

That'll be the day, Swacker told himself. Pasty-faced little shoestringer couldn't test his own spit on a postage stamp. Aloud, he said, "Listen, Ozzie, you want this stuff or don't you? I got a line of takers waiting."

"What's the weight?"

"Enough for a thousand bags, same as last week."

"Same price?"

"So far. The market's still loose."

"Pass him the bread," Ozzie said to the beard.

Winking wisely, the beard took a wad of bills from the pocket of his wrinkled sport coat and handed it to Swacker, who let the manila envelope fall to the plywood table. He then gave the bills a quick riffle.

"Next week, same place, same time," he said, pocketing the money.

Ozzie nodded a wordless agreement.

"I'll use the fire escape again," Swacker said.

"You being tailed?"

"Not that I noticed. But I play it safe."

"Help yourself."

Swacker crossed the room. The Saint Bernard got up and lumbered somnolently in his wake. Swacker opened the grated door, which yelled shrilly for oil, and noticed the big dog at his heels.

"Takes a liking to me," he said.

"Wants out is all," Ozzie said.

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"Poor bitch has been cooped up here longer than usual. Because you were so damned late."

Jostling him, the dog moved past Swacker and stepped out onto the fire escape with a huge yawn. Swacker hesitated, in the act of forming a retort to Ozzie. In that second there came the harsh high-pitched sound of metal being rent from mortar. The Saint Bernard returned to the room in one great bound that nearly knocked Swacker over.

Half a minute later all three men were taking a thoughtful look at the fire escape. The topmost anchor plate, green with ages of rust, had buckled a good six inches away from the building. The heavy lag bolts that were supposed to hold it in place had been wrenched completely free of the brick wall and were still vibrating. Swacker did not like the hard texture of the junk-littered alley 100 feet down.

"I guess you'll be leaving by the front door," Ozzie said softly.

Swacker left without a word. He bypassed the freight elevator. Somehow he felt safer using the creaky stairs.

In silence, the little brown man watched him open the door to the street.

As instructed, Marvin was waiting in the next block, but he was taking no chances in this neighborhood either. He had the car windows up, the doors locked and the engine running.

He let Swacker in, saying, "I expected to see you coming through the alley."

"I had a good reason to use the front door."

"Yeah?" Marvin started the car rolling. "What was that?"

"The damned fire escape practically come off the wall."

"With you on it?"

"Almost. This big mutt—a Saint Bernard like—beats me to it."

"And goes down?"

"Gets back off just in time. Man, it was one helluva near miss, Marvin."

"This ain't your day, Leo," Marvin said with a quiet note of satisfaction.

"Accidents, pure and simple," Swacker said, mangling his unlighted cigar. "If I didn't know that, I'd probably be thinking somebody's out to get me."

"Don't discount that thought altogether."

"What you mean?"

"You ain't the most popular guy in the state, Leo, even among your friends."

"What friends?"

"That's what I mean, Leo."

L. T. Swacker gazed up at the part of the sky that was visible

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above the tall buildings; blue as ever, cloudless as ever; the makings of a perfect day—but not for him.

"Let's have a drink, Marvin," he said.

"I thought you had a rule, no drinks until sundown."

"Forget the rules, Marvin. Drive to the Jones Joint. I'm buying."

"That's a change, anyway."

"And keep your lip from flapping, Marvin. I'm not in the mood."

The Jones Joint was a bistro operated by gamblers for gamblers. It was run well. The drinks were generous and the food was good. Swacker and Marvin bellied up to the bar and ordered.

They were just starting their second round, and maintaining a firm handhold on the cheese and crackers, when Chinese Ike sidled up. Chinese Ike was a Finn with almond-shaped eyes.

"Greetings, gents," he said. "You too, Leo. Where you been hiding the last coupla weeks?"

"I been circulating," Swacker said, lighting a new cigar. "Who wants to know?"

"Me, for one," Chinese Ike said. "John E. Jones, also."

"I don't notice John E. around."

"He stepped out to get his hair cut. But I'm here, Leo."

"So what?" Swacker demanded. "You ain't suffering from amnesia, are you?"

"Not that I know of, Ike. Clue me in. And have a drink."

"I got a drink. What I'll have is the five hundred you owe me."

"Five hundred. Since when?"

"Since a week ago Friday. The night the Hawks took the Celtics."

"I remember that all right, Ike. But where's the five hundred come in?"

"We bet it. Even money. Five hundred with me, and you covered another hundred of John E.'s dough."

"I get the picture. I also seem to recall that I picked the Hawks. And didn't they win, Ike?"

"Sure they won. By a lousy point. But you give us a three-point spread. Don't forget that, Leo. A three-point spread."

"Ike, you must be out of your freaking mind."

"How come?"

"I give you one point. Nothing more. Which makes it a standoff. Nobody gets hurt."

"I got witnesses to three points," Chinese Ike said, his almond eyes flashing.

"Name one," Swacker said, sneering around his cigar.

"John E. Jones," Chinese Ike said.

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"Maybe he's prejudiced, Ike. Ever think of that?"

"You're a stinking welsher and always have been," Chinese Ike yelled, white with rage.

"Let's get out of this trap," Swacker said to Marvin. "The air is polluted."

As they walked to the parking lot, Marvin said, "I got to say one thing for you, Leo. You're a real heel."

"Zip your lip, Marvin, before I do it for you."

"Where you want to go now?"

"Home."

It was a 35-minute drive to the condominium in the countryside. Turning into the driveway beside Swacker's garden duplex, Marvin said, "Do I get that print now?"

"What print?"

Marvin sighed wearily. "Leo, what the hell you trying to do to me?"

"Oh, that print." Swacker slid from the car. "Let's talk about that when you meet me tomorrow morning."

"Meet you where?"

"Why, right here."

Marvin's mouth gaped. "Oh, no, Leo. No, no."

"Don't get so shook up, Marvin. You know damned well I need wheels to get around. And my own vehicle won't be ready till the day after tomorrow."

Marvin gunned the car in reverse.

"Nine o'clock sharp," Swacker called after him.

On his way to the side door Swacker noticed that Minnie's bug wasn't in the carport. Probably gadding about with her fat sister as usual. A hefty pair, Minnie the Moocher and Myra the Crier; how they jammed themselves into that little bug was some kind of a miracle. Dumb broads with nothing much on their minds but bargain basements, bridge parties, church socials and movies, and never around when you needed them; but who needed Minnie? Definitely not him; not in years; not since she grew the third chin. Young fluff was his stuff now. Minnie suspected but she didn't care. Just as well. Let her mooch off him, within reason, as long as she minded her own business.

From the refrigerator he took a chunk of liverwurst, from the bread drawer a loaf of dark rye. A few minutes later, as he was settling down with a thick sandwich and a bottle of diet soda, the phone rang.

He went to the wall extension close by. "Hello?"

"Swacker?"

"Speaking."

"Home early, I see."

"Who's this?"

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"Home early. Safe and sound."

"Now cut the clowning, mister. I had a rugged day."

"A lucky day, I'd say. Plain dumb luck." The voice was not familiar to Swacker at all; in fact, there was a certain cultured tone to it that didn't fit into the general milieu of his private or public life.

"Okay, wise guy, suppose you tell me one thing—"

"But your luck's run out, Swacker. Tomorrow you'll see the change."

"—one thing," Swacker persisted. "Who gave you this unlisted number? Answer me that."

"Farewell, Swacker." A click followed.

For a moment Swacker glared at the instrument in his hand as if he were going to spit on it. Finally he replaced it on its cradle.

"Sneaky creeps," he muttered, going back to the table. "Ought to be a law. If I come face to face with . . ."

He took another bite of the sandwich. His appetite was not there.

He went to the livingroom, deciding to file a complaint with the phone company later, a strong complaint.

As he began to mount the wide terrazzo stairs he removed his necktie. What he needed now was a nice warm shower. He loosened the top button of his shirt.

Presently, Swacker entered the spacious bathroom wearing a yellow silk dressing gown and, around his size 19 neck, a large oval of blue soap suspended from a braided nylon rope. Opening the plexiglas door to the shower, he turned the handle of the water indicator to a position a few degrees warmer than lukewarm. That's how he liked it.

The proper adjustment achieved, Swacker shrugged the silken gown off his fat hairy shoulders and draped it over the back of a pink-cushioned chair. He entered the shower stall and closed the door. The water temperature was just right but the volume was low. He turned it up and began to lather his upper folds of suet with the scented soap. Some men sing at this point but not Swacker. He hummed; not a melody, but a slow asthmatic hum, like the low growl of an old dog.

He was humming along quite contentedly when the water temperature suddenly underwent a change from soothing warmth to scalding hot.

Swacker let out a roar of pained surprise and immediately turned his attention to the handle of the water indicator. He twisted it to the OFF position but nothing

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happened. The scalding water continued to strike his ample and vulnerable flesh. In panic, he reached for the door latch. It responded to his pressure by detaching itself from the door and remaining red-hot and useless in the palm of his hand.

Swacker was bellowing like a bull now but he did not know it. He was aware only of the hot steam that was filling his lungs and slowly closing the valves that fed him air and kept him partly conscious. Ugly blisters were rising all over him like boils—on his head, across his shoulders, down his back, on the bottoms of his feet.

In one intuitive effort he flung his great weight against the plexiglas door. The latch tongue snapped. The upper hinge was torn loose. Swacker battled through the narrow opening like a maniac, bending the doorframe nearly in two and leaving portions of his parboiled flesh on the jagged aluminum.

He stood swaying in the center of the bathroom for a few seconds. His bearings were all but lost. All he was sure of was that somehow he seemed to have escaped from a terrible taste of hell.

Moaning like a stricken bull, he staggered into the bedroom. He was dimly aware that he needed help. He would have willingly accepted it from Minnie the Moocher but Minnie was somewhere with Myra.

He tottered out into the upper hallway, sobbing now, and growing at last convinced of one thing: *somebody was out to get him.*

But who? Who? Who?

He reeled toward the stairhead. The scented soap fell like blue mush from the braided nylon rope around his scorched neck. It landed with a plop, unnoticed by Swacker, on the first terrazzo step downward. His blind tender foot followed. As he plunged madly forward, headfirst, he asked himself again: *Who?*

L. T. Swacker arrived at the foot of the stairs, as Minnie Swacker often described it later, red as a lobster, naked as a jaybird and dead as a doornail.

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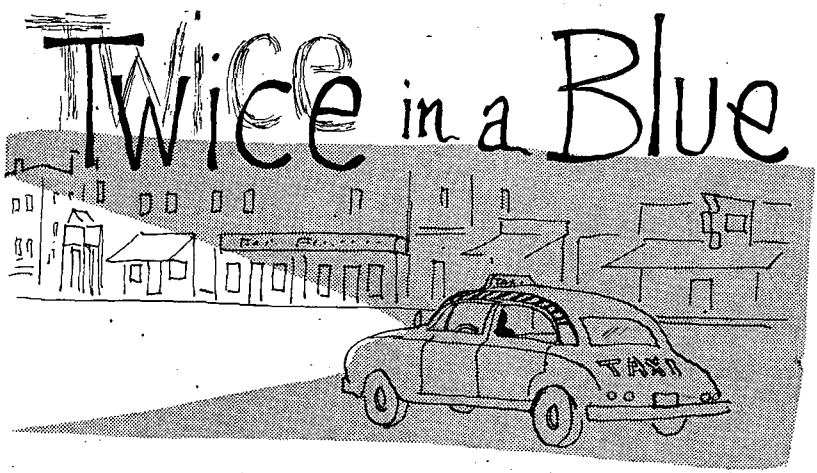
Perhaps it is not so incongruous, after all, that the same chance which puts man upon this earth may also determine his destiny.

Twice in a Blue



Cruising down the lower West Side several nights before the murder, Greggor was happily telling himself that in another week or so he'd be standing behind the wheel of a ship, cooled by sea breezes, instead of slouched at the wheel of a cab in this humidity, his shirt sticking to his back like wet paper. With a bit of luck, he'd soon be standing beside the wheel, giving the helm orders instead of taking them. He could thank Mr. Craig for that.

Greggor's entire outlook on the future had changed sharply almost a year ago, right after Mr. Craig had signed on the *Beechmont* as second mate. Mr. Craig was the friendly type of young officer, and during his first night on the bridge, chatting with Greggor, he had been pleased to learn that his helmsman came from near his home town out by Lake Michigan and had sailed in the same Great Lakes vessel as he. He had listened sympathetically to Greggor's woeful tale of twice failing to pass the Coast Guard examination for a third mate's license, even after twice attending special navigation

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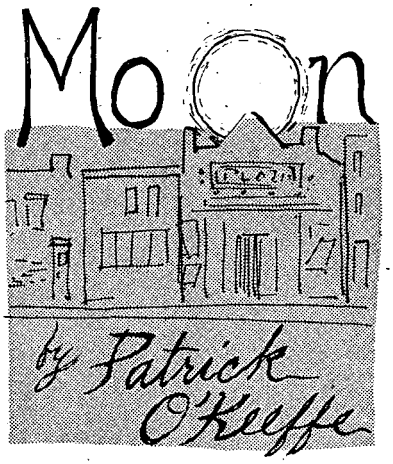
classes. Mr. Craig had been indignant when Greggor told him he despaired of ever becoming more than a bosun, and was thinking of quitting the sea and trying something ashore.

"What, and throw away the



years you've put in on the deck to get your time in! Not if I can do something about it."

Smiling at the memory of that scornful outburst, Greggor stared through the windshield as intently as through a wheelhouse window in fog. He was twenty-five and well-muscled, neat in ship's khaki shirt and shorts, bareheaded, with short brown sideburns as his concession to the hirsute age. His gaze was sweeping from one sidewalk to the other, looking for fares. The avenue was almost deserted, stores and offices closed, and either in darkness or ablaze with light to discourage burglars.

Greggor stopped at a red light. Mr. Craig, he reminisced, had done a terrific job coaching him in navigation mathematics and trigonometry, his weak subjects in high school. Mr. Craig also had given him hours of his watches below, setting up problems for him to work on, firing questions at him during quiet watches on the bridge, letting him use his sextant for practice; and when he'd passed up another voyage for a third try at a license, Mr. Craig had offered to lend him money for room and board and other expenses ashore. It would be a proud and grateful moment when he showed Mr. Craig his brand-new license.

Noting two other taxis cruising ahead, Greggor turned left on green into a one-way street. It was mainly residential, and abandoned to the night muggers, but as Greggor approached the next intersection he spotted a couple emerging from the darkened interior of the Marstone Cocktail Lounge. He slowed down hopefully, and pulled into the curb as the man raised an arm.

He was around thirty, dressed casually in a green blazer and open-neck yellow sport shirt, with styled blond hair and long side-

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burns. It was his companion, however, who held Greggor's gaze and almost forced a cry of recognition. He scarcely noted her pink, see-through dress and the velvet bow crowning her short dark hair. Greggor had seen the face under it only once before but remembered it. The young woman was Mr. Craig's wife.

"The Village—Gertie's Garter. Know it?" asked the man.

"Sure," Greggor said, lowering the meter flag and putting the cab back into gear.

"The jackpot!" cried the girl. "A New York cabbie who admits he knows his way around and won't run up the meter trying to find it."

Greggor disdained to reply. As he worked through the cross-town traffic, he felt like telling her that there were some things cabbies don't know but would like to ask, such as what she was doing in a cocktail lounge after midnight with a man who wasn't her husband, and was now going with him to a rock joint in the Village. Of course, he could be a brother, or a cousin, but Mr. Craig had never spoken of any in-laws living in the area.

During those first watches together on the bridge, Mr. Craig had talked a little about his wife. They hadn't been married very long. She was a teller in the bank where he had opened a checking account.

"I fell for Josie the first time I saw her," Mr. Craig had raved. "I used to go to her every time I made a deposit. I finally asked her for a date."

They had been married quietly before a judge; no relatives. All she had was an invalid aunt out in San Diego; his only living relative was a brother over in the Mediterranean with the Navy. Josie, of course, found it lonely when he was away, but she was friendly with a young widow at the bank, and they occasionally went out together to dinner and a movie or a show. He'd warned Josie always to come back in a taxi; never a bus and having to walk to the apartment from the stop.

From the back seat of the partitionless cab, Greggor was catching bits of his fares' conversation, which wasn't extensive, having perhaps talked themselves out in the cocktail lounge. It had small meaning to Greggor until the young woman said:

"It was wonderful hearing your voice over the phone this evening, Stacey, and knowing you were back in town."

"And it was wonderful for me being told your sailor boy wasn't in port and you could meet me at

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the Marstone. He won't be in for another week, you said. That works out nicely for us, honey. It's pretty certain I won't be going away on another auditing job within the next ten days."

Greggor burned with anger. He had met Mr. Craig's wife only once, when he'd gone to the second mate's room to return a textbook on star sights, not knowing that Mr. Craig had brought his wife aboard for a visit. Mr. Craig introduced him. Josie was pretty, all right, tall and dark and a nice figure, but he hadn't liked her quick green eyes with their big lashes flapping like wings. If he ever fell for a girl, it wouldn't be anyone like Josie—but every man to his own taste.

Josie was now showing herself to be as false as her big eyelashes, but perhaps Mr. Craig had already discovered it for himself, or suspected it. That could be the meaning of Mr. Craig's loss of cheerfulness, the troubled expression he'd seen on his face through the wheelhouse doorway, as Mr. Craig stood leaning over the bridge rail alone in the moonlight. Greggor recalled the time the *Beechmont* had unexpectedly put into Philadelphia for a few hours, northbound from Mexico. After sailing again around midnight, Mr. Craig told him he'd tried to phone his wife long distance but got no answer. He'd never known her to be out so late and he was worried. After arriving in New York, Mr. Craig told him he'd been worried without cause. Josie hadn't been sleeping well, so she'd taken a stiff dose of sleeping pills, and the phone out in the hallway hadn't wakened her.

Turning the cab into a Village street, Greggor reflected cynically that with the kind of sleeping pill Mr. Craig's precious little Josie was taking tonight, the phone in the hallway could be ringing like a fire alarm without disturbing her. If Mr. Craig ever told him of any suspicions, he'd be happy to confirm them. He felt sure she hadn't recognized him; otherwise, she'd have been guarded in her remarks to Stacey. Greggor avoided giving her a full view of his face.

Greenwich Village was lively with Saturday-night local and out-of-town pleasure seekers, wearing everything from seersuckers to bizarre mod styles and dashikas. Greggor drove cautiously through the narrow streets to Gertie's Garter, the garish, red-painted walls almost shedding plaster to the crashing electric decibels within. While Stacey paid the cab, his honey started toward the show

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place without a glance backward; if she had recognized Greggor, she wasn't letting him see it.

Stacey handed Greggor an extra dollar with the fare. "For knowing your way around," he said amusedly.

Greggor took the dollar in silence while restraining an impulse to ram it down the other's throat. Two perspiring middle-aged couples were already climbing into the cab, sighing to be driven back to their midtown, air-conditioned hotel, and en route Greggor gathered that they were tourists from Buffalo. His fares for the rest of the night were few and spread out, but then he wasn't moonlighting to make a killing; only enough to enable him to conserve his savings-bank account while off pay for his exam. With the hack-driver license he'd obtained during a long ship lay-up, he'd had no trouble getting hired in New York City, with its shortage of drivers for the night shifts. He'd stayed on the night shift after passing the Coast Guard exam, to escape the sweltering heat of the day. After what he'd seen tonight he might have been in a more peaceful state of mind right now if he'd tried for the day shift.

Greggor returned the cab to the garage in the cool of early morning and then went to the usual cafeteria for breakfast. Throughout the meal he argued with himself whether or not he ought to tell Mr. Craig about that cross-town trip to Gertie's Garter. It was strictly none of his business and perhaps he should keep his nose out of it; but didn't he owe it to the man who'd helped him realize his ambition, to tell him that his wife's companion for an evening wasn't always the young widow friend from the bank? By keeping it to himself, wouldn't he be an ingrate and deserving of Mr. Craig's contempt?

In a surge of rage over the dilemma that Mr. Craig's precious Josie had got him into, Greggor asked himself with bitterness by what perverse quirk of chance was it that he and not some other cabbie had to be approaching the Marstone at that time? He might drive around Manhattan for the rest of his life and never have anything so improbable occur to him again. It was the kind of far-out thing that happened only once in a blue moon.

Eight days later, after breakfast and sleeping until noon, Greggor telephoned the union hall from his hotel room for late word of the *Beechmont*. He was connected with his dispatcher friend.

"Gregg," the dispatcher told him, "the *Beechmont's* arriving

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ahead of schedule. Docking late tonight instead of tomorrow noon. That means you'll be signing on as of tomorrow. I'll have your assignment slip waiting for you."

Next morning, Greggor turned in his cab and his trip reports for the last time, and after breakfast and a short nap, he turned up at the union hall during the lunch hour. As he entered, he spotted Sam, the man who had taken his place as helmsman in the second mate's watch, and went over to him.

"Say, Gregg," Sam said excitedly, nodding at the folded late forenoon edition of the *Post* under Greggor's arm, "I guess you read about the second mate's wife."

Greggor nodded gravely. He could have recited the brief item by heart. The young wife of a merchant-marine officer had been found stabbed to death in their West Side apartment. She had failed to appear that morning at the bank where she was employed as a teller. The manager, receiving no response to telephone calls and anxious because a young girl had been slain a week before in a room on the next street, had sent a man to investigate. The man from the bank and the building superintendent discovered the murder. The police were questioning the dead woman's husband aboard his ship, a freighter docked on the North River.

"The police still aboard?" queried Greggor.

"They was up to the time I came ashore," Sam replied, "quizzing all hands. Man, did they give me the works! Two of 'em had me up in the cap'n's room. I had the midnight-to-four-o'clock gangway watch. They wanted to know if I'd seen the second mate go ashore or come back."

"What did you tell them?"

"I said the guy was aboard all the time, s'far as I knew. I saw him walk around the decks an' go up to the bridge a couple times an' then go back to his room. He was readin' a magazine when I looked in near four o'clock to tell him I was goin' below to shake the reliefs."

"Anyone else see him go ashore?"

"None o' the deck gang said they did. I don't know about the messmen or the engine-room guys."

"Is he still aboard?"

"No—packed his gear an' went ashore. A couple detectives went along with him."

Greggor learned more about Mr. Craig when he boarded the ship in the afternoon to sign on. He'd hoped to see the second mate there, signing off the last

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trip's articles, but he heard that Mr. Craig wouldn't be coming back to the ship and would sign off at the shipping-commissioner's office later. Mr. Craig was staying ashore to arrange for his wife's burial after her body had been released and to attend to her personal affairs. It was rumored around the ship that he was under suspicion.

The newspapers hinted as much. They gave much front-page space to the murder during the few days the ship remained in port. They reported that tenants on the same floor as the Craigs had heard or seen nothing unusual on the night of the crime. They knew little about the Craigs, who had moved in only a few months ago. Mr. Craig was away at sea most of the time. They knew of no trouble between the couple, never heard them quarreling. Mrs. Craig kept pretty much to herself. She sometimes went out after coming in from work, but it always seemed to be with a young woman who called for her in a taxi and brought her back in a taxi.

The press reported that the distraught husband claimed to have been aboard throughout the night of the murder. The young woman who called for Mrs. Craig in a taxi on occasion was a co-worker at the bank. The police had established that she had not been out with Mrs. Craig on the night of the crime. They also revealed that the contents of the dead woman's handbag had been emptied out onto a table. One police theory was that Mrs. Craig may have gone out that night and returned late; she was followed into the apartment by a mugger, who had gained entrance to the building and was lurking in a hallway. She resisted and was stabbed. The mugger emptied out her handbag and fled with whatever money it may have contained and any jewelry she may have been wearing.

There was no evidence, however, to show that Mrs. Craig had gone out that evening, nor on any other evenings without her bank co-worker. If she had not left the apartment, then a mugger had not followed her in. It was unlikely that she would have been incautious enough to open the door to a stranger. Furthermore, the door had been found unlocked. The killer may have had a key and fled without locking the door.

It was plain to Greggor and others on board the *Beechmont* that the police hadn't fully accepted Mr. Craig's statement that he hadn't left the ship during the night of the murder. One or more detectives came aboard daily.

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"They won't get off my back," complained big Sam to Greggor. "It looks like they think I'm coverin' up for the guy. He's a nice guy to sail with, like I tell 'em, but that don't mean I'm gonna stick my neck out for him if he knocked off his old woman."

The detectives were confining their inquiries to officers and crew members who were aboard the ship on the night she arrived, passing over those newly joined. Greggor was hoping to escape interrogation, but someone apparently pointed him out as a source of information on the second mate. Greggor had signed on again as an able seaman, pending action on his application to the line for an opening as third mate. He was keeping the afternoon gangway watch when a heavyset detective dressed like a longshoreman came over to him.

"You're pretty well acquainted with Mr. Craig. From the same home town."

"Not quite, but close enough."

"He worked a lot with you in helping you get a Coast Guard license. Did he ever mention any trouble between him and his wife?"

Greggor shook his head. "I never heard him speak of any."

"Do you know of any?"

Again Greggor shook his head. That cross-town ride to the Village was only potential trouble. If the police got to know about it, they might view it as suggesting a motive for Mr. Craig rather than another late return to the apartment and a mugger.

"He said he phoned his wife the night the ship docked without getting an answer, but thought nothing of it," the detective went on. "He figured she'd taken a dose of sleeping pills and didn't hear the phone. He said it had happened once before, not long ago. Would you know anything about that?"

"Sure. He called her from Philadelphia. He was worried because he'd never known her to be out so late before, and he spoke to me about it on the bridge right after we sailed. He didn't know she was taking sleeping pills."

"Would you say an officer on duty at night in port could leave the ship for a while and get back without being seen?"

Greggor stepped aside to let a crew member go down the gangway. Turning back to the detective, he stared at him for a moment or two. "It wouldn't be easy. I wouldn't bet on it."

The detective paused, seeming to ponder over his next question. "Would he be able to fix it with the sailor on gangway duty?"

"Maybe he would if it were to

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protect his job, but I'm pretty sure the sailor would have reneged by now—if you're thinking of Sam."

The detective paused again, eyeing Greggor thoughtfully. Even if the detective had been told he moonlighted as a cabbie, Greggor had little fear that he'd be asked the one question he'd shrink from answering. The detective was unlikely to inquire whether he'd ever picked up Mrs. Craig and a boyfriend as fares as it was remote for such a thing to happen.

"Okay," said the detective. "Thanks for the info."

Next morning, the newspapers reported that a man who rented a room in a brownstone opposite the Craig apartment house had told police after reading about the murder that he saw a man hurry out of the apartment house around two-thirty on the morning of the crime. He had awakened with indigestion and got up for some tablets. He happened to glance through the window. He was half asleep at the time, so all he could be sure of was that the man was bareheaded and got into a taxi.

The *Beechmont* sailed that afternoon, with Greggor feeling as relieved as if she were sailing out of a hurricane. He'd be beyond further interrogation for six weeks, perhaps for all time, if the police had ended their investigation on board. The new second mate, however, had closely followed newspaper coverage of the murder, and was eager to air his conclusions with Greggor, who was the most positive among all hands that Mr. Craig didn't commit it. He was the former third mate, temporarily promoted to replace Mr. Craig.

"The newspapers said what we all know here, that the police aren't satisfied with Mr. Craig's alibi," he remarked to Greggor during the second night out. The rudder was on gyro steering and Greggor was standing by in the wheelhouse.

"They haven't been able to prove he wasn't aboard all the time."

"One of the detectives asked me about that—if it would be possible for an officer to slip ashore and get back without being seen. I told him it could be done at night, when all was quiet, with nearly everyone turned in. He'd only need to watch for the man at the gangway to go around checking the mooring lines or go below for a mug of coffee, then sneak down the gangway. When he came back, he could watch for a chance to sneak up the gangway when the sailor again wasn't in

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sight. Then come out of his room and take a look around in the usual way."

"The pier watchman and the customs guard up at the gate would see him go by."

"If he went without his officer's cap and collar insignia, they'd take him for one of the crew. When he came back, he'd wave his pass and keep on going, which often is enough to keep the watchman from coming out of his little office to look at it."

"I suppose it could be worked," admitted Greggor.

"Another thing, Mr. Craig told detectives he phoned his wife two or three times on arrival night and didn't get any answer. He didn't think anything of it, because she sometimes took sleeping pills and didn't hear the phone. I don't think the detectives are buying that. With all the mugging and raping going on in New York City, I know if it had been me, I'd have phoned the building superintendent or the police, or called the chief mate to relieve me while I took a run over to the apartment."

"If you're saying Mr. Craig murdered his wife, you're way off course," said Greggor.

"I'm not saying he did. Only that he could have. Mr. Craig probably told you he didn't, so that's enough for you," he said.

"He'd gone ashore before I came aboard. I didn't get to speak to him."

"I'll say this for you, Greggor, you stand by him. What would you say, though, if the man seen coming out of the apartment house is proved to be Mr. Craig?"

"I'd still say he didn't murder his wife," replied Greggor stubbornly.

"But how would you explain it to yourself? Would he leave his post and go up to the apartment, then tell the police he'd been aboard all night?"

Greggor paused to switch on a small light to illuminate the clock, and then tugged four times on the lanyard to the bridge bell for two o'clock. "I'd see it this way. The ship docked ahead of schedule. His wife isn't expecting him home till next evening. He phones her. No answer. Maybe he's got suspicions she's playing around. He's got a chance now to check—see if it's pills or out with a boyfriend. He decides to risk his job and find out.

"He makes it ashore, like you told the detectives. No cabs around the piers at that hour, so he walks away from the waterfront looking for one. A bus comes along and he takes that. He finds his wife stabbed to death. He

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gets panicky. Being her husband, he'll be suspected, especially if the police get it out of him why he went to the apartment. They'll say he killed her and made it look like a mugger by emptying out her handbag.

"His only hope is to get back to the ship unseen. He's sure no one saw him enter the building or his apartment. He leaves the door as he found it, unlocked. He's lucky enough to catch a cab right outside the apartment house. At the pier, he makes doubly sure the watchman won't see the name on his pass by staggering by him as though drunk, waving the pass and cursing the *Beechmont's* engineers like a disgruntled wiper."

"You have it figured out nicely," said the second mate. "In fact, if it had been you and not Sam on gangway watch that night, I'd have said that's what happened. I'd have figured you saw Mr. Craig come aboard, he told you about it, and you chose to keep your mouth shut."

Greggor was silent. The second mate had come closer to the truth than he cared to let him know.

"Well," the second mate went on, "maybe we'll get to know the facts when we get back from this voyage. The police are expecting the cabbie who picked up the man outside the apartment house to come forward without having to be traced, and tell where he drove his fare. If it was to the *Beechmont's* pier, that'll be enough for the police."

Greggor offered no comment. He could have told the second mate that that cabbie wouldn't be coming forward, and to prevent being traced, the cabbie hadn't included that trip to the pier in his reports—and for two very good reasons: he was convinced that the man who broke down in his cab was a grief-stricken husband, not a wife killer; and he himself might be suspected of complicity in a planned murder.

For the police would never believe that it was by pure chance he was cruising past the scene of the crime at that critical moment. A thing like that happened only once in a blue moon.

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There seems to be a slight discrepancy between hearing and listening.

Ears in Arrears

BY Pauline C. Smith

Emory Frazier closed the gates, rolled his car up the driveway into the garage and neatly fitted it beside his wife's station wagon. He sat there a moment, dog-tired. Why did people say *dog*-tired? Why not executive-tired, life-tired, wife-tired—why dog-tired? Lazy dogs, maybe, but he had never seen a tired dog in his life.

He pulled himself from the seat of the car and, shoulders drooping, dragged himself from the detached garage, stepped across the driveway to a flagstoned path that led him over velvety green lawn to a bricked terrace and through a door.

The den was filled with brandy snifters, the brandy snifters filled with flourishing greenery. Terraria had become one of Alicia's hobbies—only one, however, for Alicia was a hobby-freak, being a decoupage artist, a grower of begonias, a teacup collector, a food faddist, an organic gardener . . . and Emory didn't give a damn. She could create, plant and collect to her heart's content just so she didn't chatter on about her enthusiasms . . . and on and on and on . . .

Alicia talked constantly, with waving hands and pointing fingers, and the only time she

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stopped to breathe she accused him of not listening.

Of course he didn't listen. He was tired. All he wanted to do was get each day behind him, come home and wrap himself around a martini, maybe two or three martinis, eat a good meal—a *good* meal, not one of those organic vegetarian deceptions—go off to his den, push a few brandy snifters aside so they wouldn't reflect the light of the television screen, and relax with a beer before a lame-brained Western. That's all he wanted out of life, but what did he have?

He had Alicia.

She walked into the room and started to talk the moment she hit the doorway . . . something about her ruffled picotee (what in hell was a ruffled picotee?) and how it would probably win the begonia prize, how she'd run across this fabulous lath bargain, Alicia being both a garage-sale enthusiast and a want-ad watcher . . . "You're not listening, Emory," as he brushed past her to walk down the hall to the kitchen.

He flung open the refrigerator door and dumped a tray of ice cubes into a martini pitcher.

Alicia followed him. "It's all in the way you feed and water them, that's what I say . . . And he's going to build an extension to the lath house. Won't that be nice?"

Without measuring, Emory poured in a half pitcher of gin.

"Emory, you'll burn the lining of your stomach with that poison, and here I grow and slave over and cook all those nutritious organic foods."

Emory followed the gin with a few drops of vermouth and carefully stirred the drink with an iced-tea spoon.

"You don't listen . . ."

Nor was he listening now. He glanced at her over the handle of the iced-tea spoon without faltering his slowly careful stir. Alicia was still pretty, he noticed, if you liked the hyperthyroid-eyed, tense type; blonde, small and volatile, with flying hands and hunched shoulders. He thought he had married a cute little playmate, full of gentle energy and tender enthusiasms, but the years had harshened the energy and toughened the enthusiasms, and all Emory wanted was quiet.

He poured a double, holding the ice back with two fingers, tasted the drink and heard, momentarily, what Alicia had to say.

". . . they'll unload the laths tonight. Come see my ruffled picotee before it gets dark."

Partly because he felt a faint stir of curiosity as to what a ruffled picotee might be, but mostly

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because the drink had begun to relax him into a state of lethargic acquiescence, Emory refilled his glass to the brim and followed Alicia through the kitchen door and out into the sunset.

The ruffled picotee was a flower—a giant, measuring perhaps ten inches across—a pink and white fantasy enthused over by Alicia's clattering, chattering tongue. Had she kept her mouth shut, mused Emory, he might have appreciated the remarkable bloom, but she went on and on about soil preparation, feeding, watering, pinching and knowing where to pinch—her hands gesticulating, her body tensed. Emory stopped hearing her and concentrated on his dry martini.

The back yard was a dream, with vegetables flourishing, flowers blossoming, the lath house colorful with bloom . . .

". . . I bought the laths at this sale, and they'll bring them around this evening, once they've loaded the truck."

Emory drained the glass, turned and walked back to the kitchen door.

"You don't listen," cried Alicia behind him. "You never listen when I talk."

He entered the kitchen, poured the rest of the martini from the pitcher into his glass and walked down the hall, away from the voice, and into the livingroom to look out the window at the wide and quiet street beyond, latticed by the steel of the fence laced with vines.

He had bought the house and grounds ten years before, for his bride, and she had made of it a riot of creative madness and verbal obsession. Emory gave no glance toward the ornately framed decoupages covering the wall. He looked out instead at the impersonal, quiet street beyond.

"Emory!" Her voice crashed upon his interlude. He drained the glass, choked and closed his ears against the noise as she said, "They'll be here in a little while. Did you leave the gates open? Dinner is almost ready, all from the garden."

She moved toward the hall and halted. "Emory," she said sharply, "you never listen. Did you leave the gates open?"

He turned and looked at her. "The gates?" he said.

"Open them. I told you they're going to bring the laths. They'll be here probably about dark, so open the gates and turn on the lights over the garage."

She took his empty glass from him, wrinkling her nose. "Now go out and open the gates and turn on the lights, for goodness' sake,

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so they can get up the driveway with the laths."

She left, with the glass in her hand at the end of an outstretched arm.

Emory opened the front door, walked down the driveway, unlatched the gates and pulled them wide.

He stood there in a martini haze of introspection, contemplating his few small wants—a good steak dinner, and after that, a beer and a TV Western. That's all he wanted, just those three things, and no talk, especially no talk.

He walked back up his driveway in the evening dusk, thinking of Alicia, not hating her, not even disliking her, only wishing he did not have to hear her. She was so damned *exuberant*, and he was tired.

He entered the house, and closed the door behind himself.

"Dinner is ready," Alicia called.

Emory stood at the window once more, looking out upon the vine-laced fence that enclosed his property, thinking about the delights of a steak dinner, a beer and a TV Western—with the sound turned off.

"My goodness," came Alicia's voice behind him, "didn't you hear me?"

He turned.

"Dinner's ready and getting cold. You never hear a thing I say."

He followed her to the dining room.

"Did you turn on the lights?" she asked.

He looked at her in confusion, flicked the switch that turned on the light above the dining table, and she shook her head in despair.

"The ones over the garage," she said impatiently, "for the truck with the laths. So they can see when they drive up the driveway."

He walked automatically to the kitchen, through the kitchen door and across the lawn, reached inside the garage, felt for the toggle switch on a stud, and flicked on the lights—although he could not comprehend why she wanted them on with dusk only graying the sky.

By the time he returned to the dining room, Alicia had switched off the overhead light, and candles flamed palely on the table. Alicia did like to eat her tasteless organic vegetables in style.

There was spinach, "high in vitamin K," she pointed out, "especially when it's organically raised and cooked immediately after picking," and sliced tomatoes. Carrots, "cooked with very little water." Squash, "sautéed slowly,"

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Alicia explained with feeling, "until a golden brown . . ."

No steak, thought Emory, crashing his teeth through spinach, tomatoes, carrots and squash that offered no resistance, no sustenance either, and certainly no joy.

Alicia rattled on about a cup she had acquired . . . "at a garage sale, believe it or not, and I'm quite sure it's Meissen—no saucer, but I have the *cup.* Migod, two-handled," and spoke of *Hausmalerei,* and *chinoiseries,* to which Emory did not attend. Instead, he ate his spinach without relish.

"I need more lath-house space," announced Alicia. "I plan to grow croton, Fittonia verschaffeltii, fern and peperomia for terraria; and, oh yes, African violets. Emory, you are not listening."

Emory glanced at her sullenly, feeling the martinis, knowing that had he been able to wrap himself around a thick, juicy steak, those martinis, instead of rolling uneasily, would have settled, as appetizers should.

Alicia's face danced piquantly in candlelight, while the room grew shadowed. Her eager voice trilled an obsessive monologue, forming a once-familiar rhythm that Emory sought to identify as he swung a finger in cadence under the tablecloth.

What was it? The pace, the euphony he could not recall . . .

"Emory, you are not listening," he heard faintly as he remembered at last:

"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things,
Of shoes and ships and ceiling wax,
Of cabbages and kings,"

and there was the tempo of Alicia's soliloquy!

The martinis rolled and he mentally paraphrased:

"The time has come," Alicia said,
"To talk of my pursuits,
Of gardens that I tend so well,
Of squash and arrowroots . . ."

"The laths should be here shortly," said Alicia, breaking the tempo. "I thought they could be piled by the garage. They'll start work on the lath house tomorrow. Emory, you are not listening."

Emory was not. He looked at Alicia darkly through the looking glass and wished she would shut up.

He returned to his mental litany:

"Of china cup and brandy glass,
Of planting peperomia,
Garage sales and artsy class,
Of soil that is pure loamia . . ."

Emory was delighted with his parody, so delighted that he picked up his fork and attacked

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his plate with gusto until he saw, with repugnance, that it was not steak that he thrust his fork into, but carrots. He dropped his fork, gazed with dislike upon his wife and paraphrased an immediate silent rebuttal:

The time has come when I reply,
"I'm sick of these and you.
If you go on—and on—and on,
I don't know what I'll do,"

and Emory, for the first time in ten years, thought of doing something. He gazed at Alicia in contemplation—a pretty woman still, perhaps too energetically popeyed, and with hair slightly streaked from the gardening sun, but pretty—her throat a lovely, golden-tan column of smooth perfection except when she talked—but, unfortunately, Alicia was always talking.

She was talking now, causing the cords of her neck to stand out in distended animation so that Emory wished to push them back into place—extend a thumb along the length of each ridge and press . . .

"I think," Alicia was saying, "that instead of adding onto the lath house in back, I'll add onto it at the side and have shelves built clear to the top and decoupage the pots . . . Emory, you are not listening to a word I say."

How true. How true. And once you've said it, nothing has been said, thought Emory just before his mind moved away from the doggerel that had given him momentary surcease, to Alicia, its inspiration.

The cords of her neck were taut with communication, and Emory found himself rubbing his thumbs over the palms of his hands while searching for the last two lines of his quatrain:

The only time I will have peace,
Is after you are dead.

As he rose slowly from his chair, Alicia said, "While you're up, Emory, would you bring the coffee from the kitchen?"

He walked around the table, away from the kitchen door.

"Emory," she said impatiently, "I said the coffee."

He reached her side of the table.

"From the kitchen, Emory . . ." as he leaned over her. "Emory, you don't listen . . ." at the instant he reached out to place both thumbs against the distended cords of her neck . . . "Emory!" He wrapped his fingers around the back of her neck and squeezed.

She tried to speak. The cords fluttered, her hands flew up. Her fork clattered, spraying organic spinach in her sun-streaked hair.

Emory stood still, bent over, his

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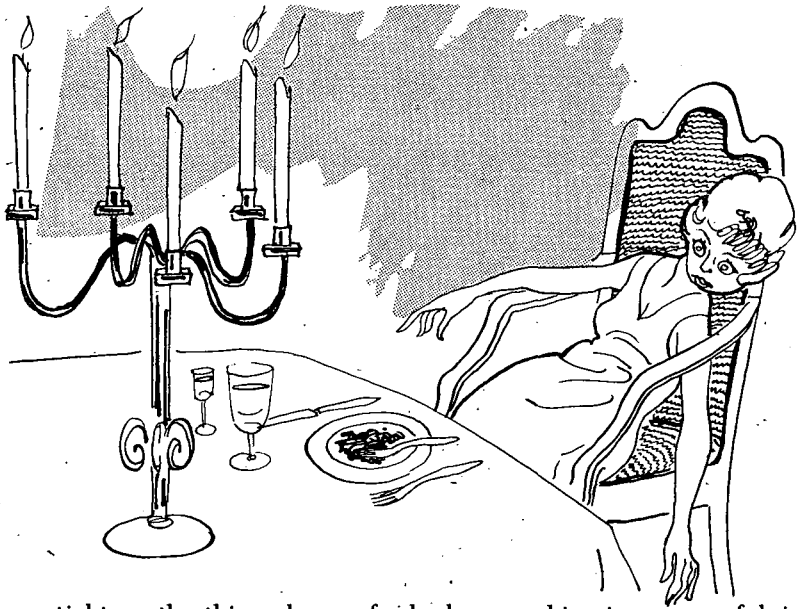

fingers tight on the thin column of her neck, composing simple couplets:

Once you are quiet,
I shall change my diet,

and:

I don't mean to execute—
How else can I make you mute?

With two-liners rollicking through his head and with that final question on his silent tongue, he loosened his grasp and drew his hands away. Alicia's head dropped slowly and drifted toward the side where it hung, the candlelight glinting fitfully in the blue of her eyes.

Emory looked down at his wife, silent now, and felt the deathly hush wrap him in a peaceful interlude.

Then, in sudden panic, Emory felt his heart leap and race with the realization that he would have to do something with the body—but only for a moment, as the hush again descended with padded silence and he knew he could do anything, plan everything in such expansively quiet peace.

He turned from the body remembering, with fragmentary recall, that Alicia had said something about coffee. He walked to the kitchen, almost dark now, but still light enough to see, and reached for the coffeepot; then he remembered that she used de-

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caffeinated coffee, and reached, instead, for the gin bottle, which he carried back to the dining table.

He sat down across from Alicia, who was looking at him through unseeing eyes. He uncapped the gin bottle, raised it to his lips and swallowed.

Then he capped the bottle and pushed it back, thinking:
I'll have to drag her out
And put her in the trunk.
But I sure as hell can't do it
If I get me too damn drunk.

It was strange, having Alicia sit across the table from him in complete silence. He relished the situation, then he thought of what he must do with her, and concentrated on his plans.

It was now deep dusk, but the windows still let in gray squares. As soon as those squares became black, Emory would have to grasp Alicia, his fingers in her armpits, thumbs on her shoulders, and heave her out of that chair.

He considered the act objectively. He would drag her to the kitchen, open the kitchen door, stoop, draw her to his shoulders, rise slowly, and with her on his back, stagger forth to the garage, open the trunk of his car, toss her in, and take off.

What then? he thought, and his poetry did not desert him:
To the quarry we will ride,
I will toss her down the side.

The window squares were now deep purple, and Emory rose from his chair, walked around the table, grasped Alicia by the shoulders as he had planned, and pulled her upright. Her head lolled and her blue eyes flashed candle flame.

As he kicked the chair free, she fell against him so that he staggered, momentarily off balance. He got a better hold on the body and dragged it from the dining room. Upon reaching the kitchen he almost dropped his burden, so startled was he at the sound of her sliding shoes along the tile floor, this having been the first sound in the hushed house since he had pressed her vocal cords to silence.

At the kitchen door he dropped the body, opened the door and looked out, surprised at the expanse of lawn and driveway between him and Alicia and the garage. Then he jumped in alarm, discovering the lights over the garage, shining in exposition brightness. *Why are the lights on?*

He dashed out in the feathery darkness and loped across lawn and driveway, reached inside the garage, felt for the toggle switch on a stud and flicked off the lights. He had a vague impression that he had enacted this same performance not long ago.

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He returned to the kitchen, stepping over his wife's body to close the door, and pondered upon the advisability of carrying Alicia through the not-quite-dark darkness, weighing the disadvantages of being seen (rather unlikely anyway, due to the width and length of the fenced property), and the advantages of having at least a degree of light for unlocking the trunk and stuffing Alicia inside.

He opened the kitchen door again and, as he had planned, stooped, drew the body to his back, grunting with the effort, and staggered forth, kicking the door closed with his foot.

He made a wavering pattern of stumbling steps across the lawn to the driveway and garage, and propped Alicia against the bumper of his car.

He fished his keys from his pocket and, with one knee holding Alicia in place, he unlocked the trunk of the car and opened it.

He stooped down, fit Alicia's chin on his shoulder, clasped an arm around her waist and, with one hand firmly on the bumper, pushed himself and his burden upright. He shuffled his feet to get into position in order to work the body into the trunk . . .

Bright light flashed the corner of his eye. Noise; clattering, clashing, rumbling noise, invaded his quiet.

He turned slowly, bent back with Alicia's weight, her head shifting position on his shoulder, and faced the noise, blinded by the headlights.

All poetry fled his mind.

With total recall, he remembered Alicia's words: *The lath men will be here . . . the truck will deliver about dark.* Alicia's admonitions: *Turn on the garage lights . . . open the driveway gate . . .*

He had heard, all right. If only he had listened!

The noise of the truck ceased. Two shadows, big, burly shadows, formed from the deeper shadow of the truck, became advancing silhouettes in the headlight beams.

Emory held Alicia tightly and waited for them.

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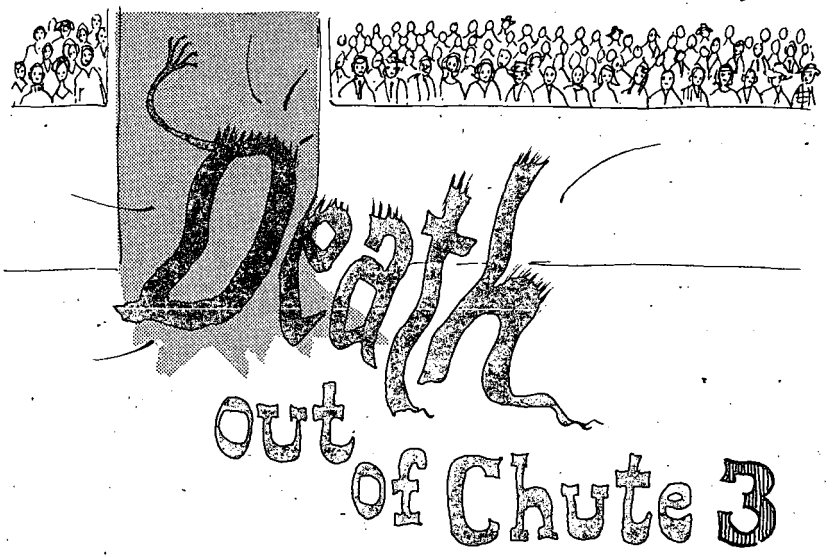
One may find that clowning around in a ring of bulls is not always a laughing matter.



The only sound in the room was the whir of the projector. The movie had no sound track. The scene on the screen was that of the arena in the Anaheim Convention Center, the Pacific Indoor Rodeo. The camera was focused on the Number 3 chute.

The chute gate swung open suddenly, and a horned bull, a Brahma, came boiling out. He charged straight ahead, bucking wildly, the cowboy on his back trying desperately to hang on for the required number of seconds. In the center of the arena the bull plowed to a stop, spun like a top, and the rider went flying, arms and legs flapping like a broken doll's, and landed hard some distance away.

The bull pawed, head lowered, shortsightedly searching for the fallen rider.

The woman at my side said tensely, "Watch the left side of the screen now. There!"

A tall rodeo clown, wearing a

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pink bowler hat, a peppermint-striped shirt, and baggy pants, came legging it into camera range, angling to get between the bull and the prone cowboy, who was ominously still. Then two riders came out and cut the Brahma off, herding him out of the arena.

His back to the camera, the clown kneeled over the prone figure for about thirty seconds, as though to help him up. Then two men hurried up with a stretcher, and the clown walked out of the arena without once turning his face to the camera.

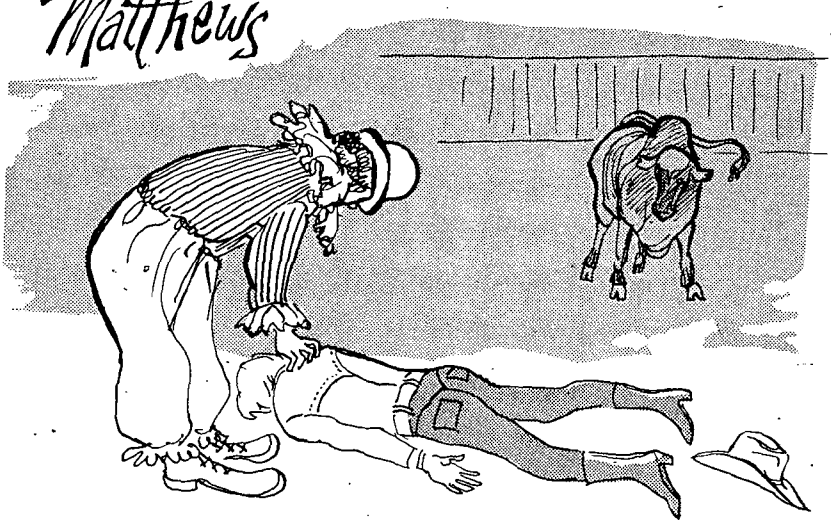
The screen went blank. In a moment the lights came on in the small projection room, and I turned to the blonde woman beside me. Eileen Raga was in her late twenties, tall and slim, chic as a fashion model, with an authentic New England accent. The bull rider we'd seen on the screen was her husband. He had been buried two days ago.

"Well, Mr. Plummer?" Her blue eyes regarded me steadily.

"I'm curious, Mrs. Raga. Why did you pick me? I know about as much about rodeos as . . . Well, I *hate* horses and the feeling is mutual."

"You were once a professional athlete, Mr. Plummer. You played first base for the Dodgers. I thought you might have an affinity—"

by Clayton Matthews



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"A professional athlete, yes, but not a rodeo performer."

"A *performer?* Mr. Plummer, my husband was an athlete in every sense of the word. A good rodeo cowboy, champions like Casey Tibbs, Jim Shoulders, and Sam Raga, have to keep in top-notch physical condition. They absorb more punishment than any other professional athlete!"

I knew when I was licked. I sighed and held up my hands in a traffic cop's gesture. "All right! So you picked a private cop who was an ex-ballplayer—"

I was interrupted by a cough, and faced around to see a tall man in cowboy boots, tan corduroy pants and a hand-stitched shirt, standing in the aisle. He was in his early sixties, but still a powerful figure of a man, with a long, sunburned face, fierce black eyes, and square, yellowed teeth of which any horse would be proud. With him was a woman, some years younger. She had once been a beauty; now she was faded and vague.

"Eileen," the man said, "I just wanted you to know—"

Eileen Raga turned, face composed. "Oh, Mr. Lord . . . this is Lincoln Plummer, a private investigator. Mr. Plummer, this is Steven Lord and his wife, Alice."

"How do, Plummer." He gave me a spare nod. His wife gave no indication she even saw me. "About Sam . . . Eileen, in spite of what you may think, I'm right sorry."

"I know you are, Mr. Lord," she said gravely. "Thank you."

"Well . . . I just wanted you to know." He nodded to me again, took his wife's arm, and they left.

I stared after them for a moment, then said to Mrs. Raga, "You say your husband died of a broken neck. How can you be sure it wasn't caused by the tumble from the bull?"

"It could have happened that way." She looked off. "The police seem inclined in that direction. That is why I decided to employ a private detective."

"Then why do *you* think he was murdered?"

"There have been only a few cases of thrown bronc riders or bull riders dying of a broken neck."

She paused, digging a cigarette out of her purse. I held a match for her, sensing there was more to come.

There was. She exhaled and said, "Then, there's Pinky."

"Pinky?"

"Pinky Bottoms, he's the regular rodeo clown—"

"Pinky *Bottoms*? You have to be kidding!"

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Eileen Raga was too caught up in some inner torment to respond any way but seriously. "I assure you that Bottoms is his real name. Pinky isn't, I suppose. I don't even know his real first name. As I was saying, Pinky swears he didn't go into the arena that day. Pinky drinks—he's what they call a wino, I believe. He claims he was drunk, unable to go on."

"The police don't believe that?"

"Pinky has periods of . . . blackouts; periods when he doesn't remember afterward what he does. That fact is well known." She moved shapely shoulders in a slight shrug. "The police think he just doesn't remember going on."

"And that's all you have to go on?"

"Not entirely." She was strangely hesitant. "My husband . . . Sam made enemies easily, Mr. Plummer."

"How so?"

"He was temperamental. I'm sure many people you talk to will call him arrogant and unfeeling. For two years he has . . . had been rodeo champion and he did not let anyone forget that fact. In addition, he . . ."

After a little time had passed, I prompted her. "Yes?"

"He was quite . . . attractive to women. A top rodeo star has . . . I think they call them groupies. Like today's rock singers, girls and women follow them around, throwing themselves at them. My husband, Mr. Plummer, was not averse to them." She faced me squarely, the torment surfacing now, pinching her features white. "I loved my husband, whatever he may have been, and if he was murdered, I want his killer punished!"

I was silent for a moment in thought. I could imagine what this patrician, sophisticated woman must have suffered married to the cocky, swaggering, womanizing cowboy Sam Raga must have been, yet putting up with it, too much in love with him to walk away.

I was thinking something else, too. I'd known women before who had put up with that kind of treatment just so long, finally reaching the breaking point. With a couple of them the breaking point had meant murder. Yet I couldn't see this woman masquerading as a clown and snapping Sam Raga's neck in full view of several hundred people. Of course, a woman with only a rudimentary knowledge of karate could crush the neck of an unconscious man with the right blow. It didn't take that much strength.

I said, "I guess my first move is to talk to this Pinky Bottoms. The

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rodeo's over. Any idea where I might find him?"

"Check with the R.C.A.—the Rodeo Cowboys Association."

I found Pinky Bottoms working in a little rodeo in a small town outside Bakersfield. Since it was late August, driving up into the San Joaquin Valley was like stepping into a bake oven, and the small car I drove wasn't air-conditioned. I'd been in the business for only a couple of years, and neither year had been what you might call affluent. Also, a compact had one advantage: it was good for a tail job, especially in Los Angeles, where you could stop at a signal and see one in any direction you looked.

The rodeo was held in a dusty field, temporary bleachers having been set up. I arrived in the middle of the bronc riding events, and I sat on a hard, splintery bench and broiled in the sun, watching the events without a great deal of comprehension.

The rodeo clown came out several times, usually in the hiatus between events, once to lure a bucking horse away from his thrown rider. I was covered with dust from head to foot when the rodeo finally was over.

I was directed to a ratty-looking house trailer and rapped on the door. A hoarse voice told me to enter. The inside was like a sweatbox and stank of raw whiskey and cheap cigars. Bottoms sat on a packing case before a mirror tacked on the wall, removing his makeup. A cigar smoldered in an ash tray by one foot, a water glass full of whiskey by the other.

"Mr. Bottoms?"

He turned a ravaged face to me, a face ravaged by time and too much alcohol, and made even worse by the half-removed makeup. "What is it, bo?"

I had never heard that word spoken outside of old movies. I said, "I'm Lincoln Plummer, Mr. Bottoms, a private cop working for Mrs. Raga. She thinks her husband was murdered. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Private dick, huh? Ask away, bo." He picked up a pint of cheap bourbon and offered it to me. "Drink?"

"No, thanks." I straddled a campstool. "Do *you* think Sam Raga was murdered?"

"What do I know, I'm not a dick," he said with a shrug. He swigged half the contents of the water glass. "I wasn't there, being temporarily indisposed."

"So I understand. Which means somebody had to take your place. Did whoever it was use your costume?"

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"Only my hat, my pink bowler. Anyway, it's missing."

"Is it hard to get a rodeo clown costume?"

"Any costume rental place. Not many pink bowlers around, though."

"Any ideas about who it was?"

"Pick up any telephone book and run your pinkie down a column. Nobody much liked Sam Raga, except maybe Mrs. Raga—and I'm not all that sure about her."

"How about you?"

"I hated his insides, bo," Bottoms admitted cheerfully, and took a pull of his drink. "He got me banned from two rodeos last year. He went up top and claimed I boozed too much. He wouldn't trust me to lure a bull away in case he got tossed. That's part of our job, see? It's not all chuckles and pratfalls, being a clown. So I'm not weeping over Sam Raga, in case you're wondering. But I'd suggest you check the broads. Sam Raga made a play for all the broads. Love 'em and leave 'em, and some of 'em wasn't what you might call crazy about the Raga philosophy."

"But how could a woman get away with going into the arena masquerading as a clown?"

"Could if she was tall as me and flat-chested. And you sure shouldn't rule out boyfriends. Many of the guys hated Raga's insides for taking over their broads." He paused to take a drink.

"Do you know a Steven Lord?" I asked.

"Sure, bo. Around the rodeo circuit we call him the Lord of Texas. He has a big spread in Texas, and he's a rodeo buff. Makes most of 'em. But he got his dough from oil. Wells sprout like weeds on that ranch of his, and he raises Brahma stock on his ranch, too. Mean as rattlesnakes."

"The bulls or Lord?"

He stiffened and glared at me. "Now, what kind of a crack is that?"

"I was wondering if he had any reason to kill Raga."

He turned to the mirror, wiping off a smear of greasepaint. "You're the dick, you find out."

He had turned cryptic now. It was clear I wouldn't get anything more from him. I said, "Tell me, bo . . ." Now he had me doing it. "Is Pinky for real?"

"You're the dick, you find out."

As I left, he was emptying the last of the pint into the water glass.

The first thing I did after returning to Los Angeles was call Eileen Raga. Sam Raga had owned a ranch in Wyoming, but she had told me she'd be staying

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in a Long Beach hotel for a time, at least long enough to see what I could find out.

I didn't waste any time when I got her on the phone, figuring shock tactics would work the best. "Mrs. Raga, who was your husband's girlfriend just prior to his death?"

I heard the sharp intake of her breath, but I'd judged her correctly. There were no screams of outrage. After a long moment she said, "Try the Gilberts, husband and wife, Mr. Plummer. Duane and Kathy Gilbert." She gave me an address for them.

"The Steven Lord I met in the projection room—what connection does he have with all this?"

She said hesitantly, "His daughter was once in love with my husband. But that was nearly two years ago. The daughter died."

"What did she die of?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Plummer. Why are you asking me these questions? Do you suspect—"

"No, no, nothing like that. Lord's name came up, and sometimes that can cause ripples, like a rock dropped into a pond."

I thought that sounded pretty profound for a private cop.

The Gilberts, husband and wife, lived in a house trailer in Thousand Oaks. Although it was the middle of the afternoon of a weekday, both Gilberts were home.

Duane Gilbert admitted me, a beer can clutched in one hand. He stood tall in his stocking feet—dark, slender, about thirty-five, with a lean face weathered as leather, sun crinkles in the corners of his eyes.

We went through the introduction routine. His wife was at the sink counter fixing sandwiches. She was a couple of years younger, blonde and slender, with the same sun-hardened, outdoor look about her. She wore a T-shirt and faded jeans, small feet in moccasins. She invited me to have a sandwich and a beer, and I accepted.

Gilbert motioned me into the breakfast nook across one end of the trailer. Considering it impolite, as well as impolitic, to question them until lunch was served, I waited, mostly in silence. Gilbert seemed the strong, silent type. At least he was silent.

Neither seemed to resent my business there. Come to think of it, neither had Pinky Bottoms—not at first. Which was unusual, to say the least. Normally, people resented a private cop poking at them, and bristled with hostility like a porcupine.

Finally we were all seated in

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the nook, each with a ham sandwich and a can of beer. I took a companionable bite and washed it down with a swallow of beer before saying, "Were both of you at the Pacific Indoor Rodeo in Anaheim?"

They admitted that they had been.

"Were either of you watching when Sam Raga was thrown from the Brahma?"

Duane Gilbert said quickly, "I was about to fork a bull of my own. Had no time to watch anything else."

Kathy Gilbert said, "And I was in the ladies', losing my lunch. I always do when Duane is about to ride."

"From what I hear," I said bluntly, "you might have been more concerned about Sam Raga than your husband."

Kathy paled, sucking in her breath, and her husband leaned forward, face flushing. "What do you mean by that crack, fella?"

"I understand your wife was involved with Sam Raga. Maybe you didn't know. If not, I'm sorry."

"Oh, I knew about it," he said grimly. "But that's all over."

"You mean now that he's dead?"

"No, that's not what I meant. It was over before that. A week before the Anaheim Rodeo, we got together—Sam, Kathy and me—and they agreed not to see each other again."

"He agreed, or you threatened to kill him, then carried it out?"

"He agreed!"

I switched my gaze to the woman. "Is that right, Mrs. Gilbert?"

"Yes. Sam . . . he laughed at me and said it was fine with him," she said in a whisper, eyes cast down. "He said the sea was full of fish."

"Since Sam Raga is dead, I have only your word for that. You, Mr. Gilbert, could have killed him because he refused to break off with your wife. You, Mrs. Gilbert, could have killed him because he *did* break it off."

"Then you'd better take your pick, Plummer." Gilbert laughed, a sudden, ugly sound. "Either way, you have to prove it, and that ain't gonna be easy."

"You're right, it's not going to be easy." I sighed and squirmed out of the nook. "Thanks for the lunch. I may want to talk to you both again."

"We're flying to Texas in the morning," Gilbert said.

"Texas?"

"Yep. I'm going to work rodeo stock on the Lord ranch. I work there during the rodeo slack sea-

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son." He gave me a hostile sneer. "Unless you're going to pull that old bit—don't leave town without letting you know."

"No, Mr. Gilbert," I said somewhat wearily. "I'm not the police. I have no authority to tell you that."

However, before two more days had passed it became clear that I would be joining their trek to the Lone Star State. What few leads I had—if they could ever have been called that—led nowhere. Steven Lord was the only one I hadn't questioned, and a long-distance phone call wouldn't cut it. I have never been fond of the wide-open spaces, but it seemed I had no alternative.

I had checked into Lord's background. There was a scarcity of facts about his early life, but somehow he had managed to get enough money together to purchase a two-hundred-acre ranch in west Texas. Within a year of his buying it, oil had been discovered. Today, he owned almost a thousand acres and was several times a millionaire. He had the one daughter, now dead.

What made me finally decide to go to Texas was something I learned about the daughter. There was some mystery about her death. She had died in Texas of an overdose of sleeping pills. It had been quite a while back, of course, but she *had* known Sam Raga. The coroner's verdict of accidental death didn't mean much; not in Lord's own stomping ground, with his money and, I was sure, considerable influence.

Since flying to Texas would mean inflating the expense account, I called Eileen Raga for an okay.

"Of course you may go, Mr. Plummer," she said. "Do you think Steven Lord—?"

"Mrs. Raga, don't jump to any hasty conclusions. It's just something I feel should be followed up. It probably means absolutely nothing. I'll try to get back as soon as possible."

"I'll be here, waiting."

I caught a flight out of International and landed in El Paso long before noon. There I rented a car and drove east toward the Lord ranch.

It was a long, hot, dusty drive, down a two-lane, blacktopped highway, usually straight as an arrow. The land was mostly flat, with a few gentle hills. Mesquite trees and cactus grew in great profusion. Grazing cattle were hemmed in by barbed-wire fences. Occasionally an oil derrick loomed up. Once I passed a cluster of them, like a group of giant, prehistoric insects feeding. The towns

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were few and were little more than huddles of weathered buildings servicing highway traffic.

The Lord ranch was off the highway about five miles down a gravel road. I drove through an arched gate, with wide steer horns nailed to the crosspiece overhead. A wooden plaque dangled from the crosspiece, letters burned in by a branding iron: *Steven Lord.* I drove over a rattling cattle guard, and I was on the Lord ranch. The oil derricks were thick now, like toadstools springing up after a hard rain.

I wasn't sure what welcome to expect. Lord could very well order me off his property; he certainly would be within his rights.

The ranch house was new, but constructed in the old Mexican hacienda style: stucco, built around a patio with a swimming pool. The house was on a knoll, commanding a view of the countryside for miles in every direction. There were corrals and barns off to one side and quite a bit of activity. Dust rose in a great cloud from one corral where a cowboy was astride a bucking horse. Men were perched on the top corral pole, yelling salty comments.

As I parked the car, I saw Steven Lord coming toward me. He was dressed about as he had been the other time I'd seen him, but the fancy Western duds were filmed with dust now.

He stopped at the car, hands on the window, and leaned down to peer in. "Plummer, ain't it? I was expecting you."

I must have gaped at him, for he bared those equine teeth in a grin. "The Gilberts are here. They told me you'd been talking to them. Bottoms, too. I figured you'd be getting around to me."

"Pinky Bottoms is here?"

"Yep. He comes around in slack season. I put him up, supply him with booze, and he does a little work with the bulls. Didn't they tell you? I'm a rodeo buff, always good for a touch. It's all right, I enjoy it. And I can afford it."

He stepped back, and I got out. I had never been on a ranch in my life, and I saw just how much out of place I was—the only man in sight in shoes and a suit. The others were all in boots and jeans, or some such.

"Now that you're here, you're more than welcome, of course," Lord said. "Stay as long as you like. But I'm afraid you made a long trip for nothing. I know nothing the others don't."

"I have just a few questions."

"I'll answer the best I can. I still think it's a waste of your time. Soon as the boys get

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through taking the edge off a few broncs, we'll go in, have a snort and talk. Come along, Plummer."

He threw an arm across my shoulders and led me toward the corral. Again, no resentment at my poking around. Was this some kind of a weird conspiracy, all who were connected with Raga's death willing to cooperate fully, confident I would find nothing? Or was Lord's welcome just the famed Texas hospitality in operation?

He climbed up on the top pole where the others perched like big birds and hooked his boot heels. I was content to remain on the ground, peering through the poles. Another horse was being led out, a cowboy about to mount him.

I watched man and horse erupt skyward, the horse's back arching like a bow. The rider stayed on, although daylight showed briefly between his rump and the saddle. The horse came down on all four feet, the earth shaking under me like an earthquake tremor. Again the horse reared up. This time the rider left the saddle, tumbling over once in the air, then hit the ground. Hoots of derision came from the fence riders and the thrown man got slowly to his feet and limped away, grinning sheepishly.

It went on for another hour, most of the bronc riders thrown, but a few staying on until the horses wearied and stood with heads down, blowing like a bellows. One of the thrown riders was Duane Gilbert. The whole thing bored the hell out of me, but then any number of people have told me that baseball bores them. I suppose as a spectator sport it was better than bullfighting. At least no blood flowed.

Finally it was over. The men got down and drifted away.

Lord came over to me. "Let's go have that snort now."

The sun was low in the west, but it was still hot. Lord escorted me into the house, down a long hall and into a study—Old West motif all the way. The study itself was enormous, with a large picture window overlooking a vast reach of nothing. There was a long bar along one wall, complete with rail and spittoons. The painting of a voluptuous nude hung behind the bar.

Lord went to the back of the bar. "What's your pleasure, Plummer?"

"I'll just have a beer."

He didn't serve me a bottle or a can. No, indeed. He drew it from a keg, dashed the foam off the top with a bar knife and gave it to me with a flourish. He made himself a dark bourbon and water

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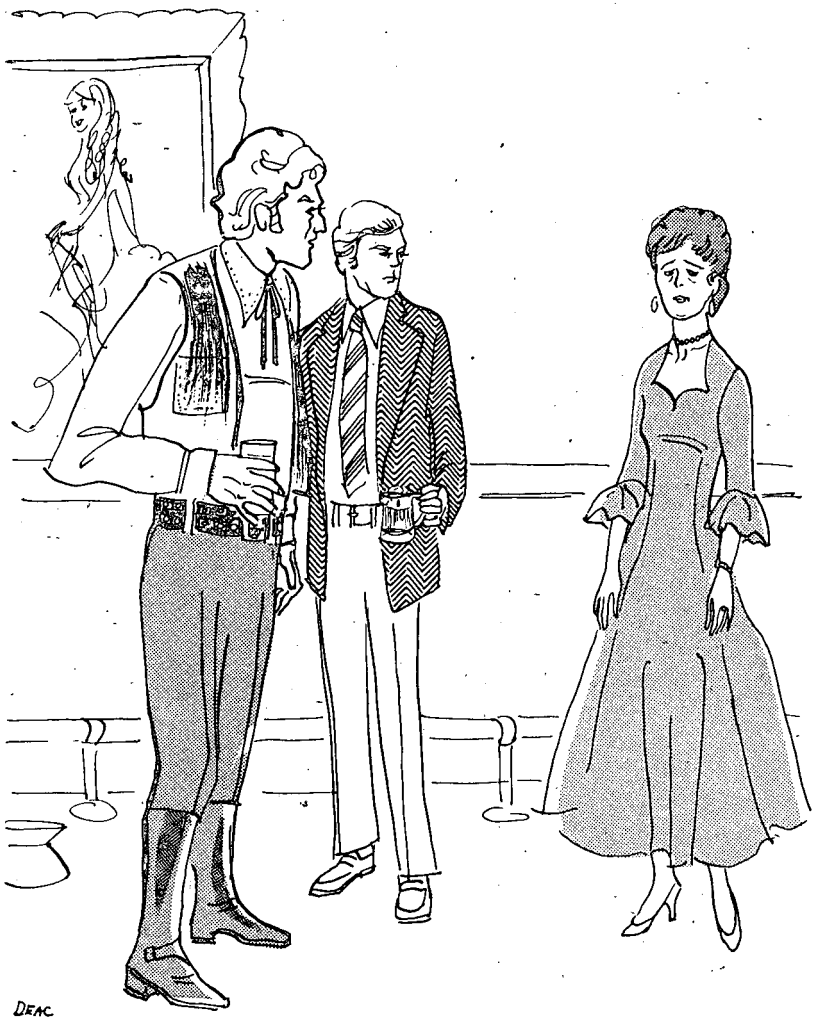

and then paused with the glass halfway to his mouth, staring past me.

He said, "What is it, hon?"

I turned. Alice Lord was moving toward us. She wore a dress almost to the floor that seemed curiously old-fashioned. Her features had an unfocused quality, as though they were constantly

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changing shape, and I got the curious impression that she floated toward us rather than walked.

Now she stopped, gesturing vaguely with a blue-veined hand. "Nothing, Steven. I just heard voices in here and—"

"Plummer, you've met my wife, Alice."

"How do you do, Mrs. Lord."

She had already turned away without acknowledging the greeting, and was moving slowly out of the room.

"You'll have to excuse my wife, Plummer. Alice has been . . . uh, sick," Lord said, a rough edge to his voice. He drank deeply, then whacked his glass down on the bar and asked briskly, "Now, about these questions of yours . . . Fire away, Plummer."

I stalled for a moment, taking a drink of beer. Somehow Alice Lord had thrown me a little off balance. "I understand Sam Raga once worked for you here?"

"He did. Back before he hit it big. Nothing unusual about that. Most rodeo people down on their luck work for me sooner or later."

"How did you get along with him?"

"All right, I reckon." He shrugged wide shoulders. "Sam was okay back then. Once he became champion, it went to his head. But I expect you've been told all that before, haven't you?"

"There was never any trouble between you?"

Nothing changed in his face, but I sensed a tightening, a drawing back. "No trouble, Plummer."

"How about your daughter Jean?"

He leaned on the bar, shoulder muscles straining the fancy shirt. "What does my little girl have to do with this?"

"How well did she know Sam Raga?"

"She didn't."

"That's not the way I heard it, Mr. Lord. I heard that she—"

"What's this about Jean? Steven, what's he talking about?"

Alice Lord had returned unnoticed. Lord threw me a murderous look, hurried around the bar and began urging her out of the room. "It's nothing, hon. Nothing for you to fret about."

"But I heard him mention Jean . . ." she said in a plaintive voice. She looked back over her shoulder at me as she left.

Lord came back in a few minutes. Obviously he was still furious, but he had himself under control. He went behind the bar and finished off his bourbon and branch before he said, "I suppose you've been digging around about my little girl?"

"I was told she was involved

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with Sam Raga. What about it?"

"All right! She was and I put a stop to it!" His big hands were on the bar, and they crawled over each other like nervous animals. "He was married, with a good wife. He had no damned business messing around with my little girl!"

"You put a stop to it?"

"I did. I ordered him to stop seeing her. Sam just laughed and said, right in front of her, that there were other streetcars he could catch." He was staring unseeingly across the room. "Like to broke my little girl's heart."

I said very softly, "And that was when she killed herself?"

"Killed herself!" He gave a start and focused on me. "It was an accident!"

"That was the coroner's verdict, I know, but I wonder how much of a hand you had in that. I have to wonder if your daughter didn't kill herself over Sam Raga."

"You spread that story around, Plummer, and I'll kill you!" He leaned toward me. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Lord, I understand."

Lord relaxed suddenly, and laughed, with a baring of teeth. "Anyway, you can't prove anything, Plummer."

For a moment I thought he was daring me to prove he'd killed Raga. Then I realized he was talking about his daughter's suicide. Or was he?

I took a deep breath and said, "You could have killed Raga, because you blamed him for your daughter's suicide."

For a moment I thought I'd gone too far. His face darkened, and his eyes narrowed to slits. I got ready to jump back as he placed his hands flat on the bar as though about to vault over it. Then, unexpectedly, he threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"You're a darb, you know that? I could throw you off my spread, you know that, Plummer?"

"Yes, I know that." My voice sounded rusty.

"But I won't. You stick around long as you like. You'll be wasting your time, but that's your problem." He dismissed me with a contemptuous gesture. "Supper is at seven. I'll have someone show you to your room."

When I left the study, he was brooding over a fresh drink.

I thought of leaving, because he was right—I was probably wasting my time. Yet stubbornly I stuck around. Lord ignored me after that, not even speaking to me; but I doubt anyone noticed. Apparently, having a houseful of people was not unusual here. For dinner

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that night, there were fifteen seated around the huge table in the dining room. The only ones I knew were Pinky Bottoms and the Gilberts; and nobody bothered to introduce me to anyone else.

Although at the table with us, Mrs. Lord seemed to be off somewhere by herself. I glanced at her from time to time, sensing she was the weak spot, but I couldn't think of the right approach. I knew if I spooked her, Lord would really throw me off the ranch—or kill me.

Dinner consisted of steak, panfried Texas-style, hashed brown potatoes and a salad, with heaping mounds of homemade ice cream for dessert. As I started to leave the table, someone jabbed an elbow into my ribs. I glanced around into Pinky Bottoms' ravaged face.

"Surprised to see me, bo?" His whiskey breath almost knocked me over.

"Not particularly. Lord told me you were here."

"Find your killer yet?"

"Would it surprise you if I said the killer is here?"

"That so?" He didn't even blink. "Can you prove it?"

"Not yet."

"Didn't think you could. And even if you could, do you think Lord would let you take away whoever it is? People didn't think much of Sam Raga."

"Is that the way it is?"

"That's the way it is, bo."

He wandered off, and I was left alone after that—literally. I could have been the original pariah for all the attention I got from the people around me. Evidently the word had spread as to the reason I was there.

I didn't receive any hate-filled glances, no scathing remarks. I was simply ignored. Taking the hint, I retired early to the room assigned me. It was a comfortable room, even equipped with a wet bar. I took off my shoes, opened a can of cold beer, and stretched out on top of the bed with a paperback mystery. I carry a supply of them wherever I go—their heroes always have these steamy encounters with lovely and seductive females. Nothing like that ever happens to me. I was missing the boat somehow.

A couple of hours later, just at an interesting, climactic chapter, I heard something in the patio outside my door. It sounded like a woman sobbing. I looked at my watch—it was past midnight. I turned off the light, padded to the door in my stocking feet and cracked it. Mrs. Lord was moving across the patio in a long, trailing nightgown, weeping brokenheart-

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edly. I followed her, of course.

She went around the pool and into a room on the far side. She left the door open. After a moment a light came on inside the room. I eased inside. It was obviously a storage room, with trunks and similar items in a haphazard clutter.

Mrs. Lord was sitting beside an open trunk across the room. I walked over quietly to stand behind her. I doubted a herd of buffalo would have disturbed her, so lost was she in her own private world. At least she had stopped crying. A picture album was open in her lap.

I looked over her shoulder. She was looking at a page of pictures of a girl, age ranging from baby pictures up to about twenty. The girl was beautiful, except in a couple of the photos she bared those horse molars she'd inherited from her father.

"A lovely girl, Mrs. Lord," I said gently. "How old was she when she died?"

She didn't start or glance around but answered in a dreamlike voice, "Jean was only three weeks past her twentieth birthday. Steven put these pictures away. He didn't want me looking at them all the time."

She turned a page, and I went tense. There, in a faded photo, was a man in a rodeo clown costume and makeup, the equine teeth unmistakable. "Your husband, Mrs. Lord?"

"Yes, that's Steven—right after we were first married. He tried so hard to become a rodeo champion but he only won third prize money once. We were poor then, and he had to work as a clown to support us. He was so ashamed. That's why he changed his name when we bought this ranch."

She gestured to the open trunk. I stepped around her to peer inside. Folded neatly was a rodeo clown costume, and resting on top of it was a pink bowler hat.

"Mrs. Lord," I squatted down before her, "did you know that your husband forced Sam Raga to break off with your daughter and she killed herself because of it?"

"Oh, no! That was an accident!"

"No, Mrs. Lord, it was no accident." I felt like a heel bringing more grief to this tortured woman, but there was another woman in a Long Beach hotel also suffering at this moment. "It was suicide."

At a sound from the doorway I glanced up. Steven Lord stood there in pajama bottoms, a .45 revolver in his hand. I got slowly to my feet.

"I figured if I gave you free

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rein of the place, Plummer, you'd give me an excuse to kill you."

"You killed Sam Raga, Lord. You went into that arena masquerading as a clown and snapped his neck like a matchstick." I tried to keep my voice steady. That .45 loomed large as a cannon. "You killed him because you blamed him for your daughter's suicide." I jerked my head at the trunk. "There's the proof I've been looking for."

"That's right, I killed him and I'd do it again!"

Mrs. Lord came to her feet. "Steven! It's not true, is it? Did you cause Jean to—?"

"Stay out of this, hon. I know what I'm doing."

"You know what you're doing! Dear God! Poor Jean is dead and now this man says you killed Sam!"

I said, "You'd better listen to your wife, Lord."

The .45 centered on me. The horse teeth bared in a lethal grin, and his finger tightened on the trigger.

"No, Steven, no!"

Mrs. Lord ran toward him just as he fired, and she took the bullet meant for me. At that range a .45 slug has enough force to down an elephant. She was smashed back against the wall, then slid slowly to the floor.

Lord started toward her. "Hon? You shouldn't have . . ."

He had forgotten me. He dropped to one knee beside her and touched her cheek with his fingers. He offered no resistance as I plucked the gun from his hand. As I went out the door, he had picked up his dead wife in his arms and was crooning to her.

There were no lights on in the rooms ringing the patio. Apparently all the Lord guests thought the gunshot had meant my demise and didn't want to be witnesses.

In Lord's study I spent some time on the phone before I finally got through to the sheriff's office in the county seat and reported what had happened.

Then I got the long-distance operator and told her to ring the hotel in Long Beach where Eileen Raga was staying.

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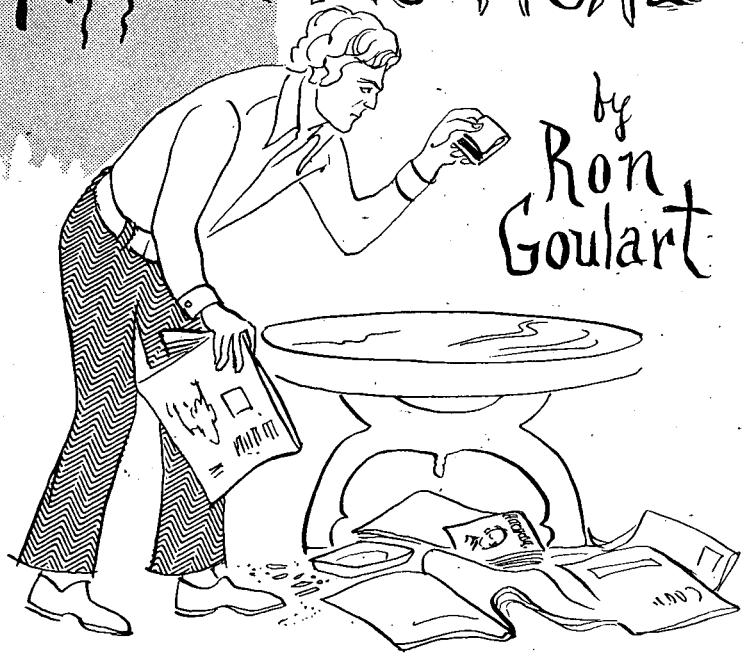
Stupidity may be catching if one does not take the proper precautions.

That'll Never Happen NO MORE

by Ron Goulart



Stupid jerk," he said, grabbing the sandy volleyball which had just slammed into his chest, and hurling it in the direction of the ocean.

A hairy boy came striding

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across the bright yellow sand. "What'd you do that for, buddy? We didn't—"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Grady Thorne strode to meet the young man. "Throwing your damn—"

Thorne was grabbed from behind. "Calm down. We don't want attention."

Thorne shuffled his feet on the warm sand. He was a middle-sized, wide-shouldered man of thirty-two, in good shape for someone who spent most of his working time indoors. "Yeah, you're right, Buzz. Sorry."

Buzz Klinger, a year younger and five inches taller than his friend, stepped ahead of Thorne, who was holding a knobby hand out toward the hairy young man. "Let's forget about the whole thing," Buzz suggested, grinning.

"I don't see why he—" The young man gestured at the bright blue Pacific where the ball was bobbing in the surf.

"Sorry," said Thorne. He turned away, returning to the blanket where he and Buzz had been sitting and planning their next robbery.

They'd selected a scrubby stretch of beach where there weren't any other nearby bathers that Sunday. The unexpected volleyball had been the first intrusion in their quiet conversation.

Buzz said, "Let's get back to what—"

"I'm really going to get hold of myself," promised Thorne as he squatted on the blanket. "It's stupid to lose my temper like that."

Buzz grinned. He hummed the first line of an old folk song, *That'll Never Happen No More,* a favorite of his.

"Okay, okay," admitted Thorne. "I know. I've said the same thing before, but I have a feeling . . . I mean, one or two more jobs and the pressure will be off me. Maybe Amanda will settle down, too."

"You still think she—"

"Yeah, I know she's seeing somebody else." Thorne poked his thumb into the sand. "I guess our life at the moment isn't what she expected. Well, I didn't imagine five years ago I'd still be working in a bookstore when I was thirty-two."

"A high-class, rare bookstore," reminded Buzz. "With a lot of very posh customers. Like this Kenneth Ivey you were telling me about."

Nodding, Thorne said, "I was up at Ivey's place last week, delivering an order of rare books to him. He's a set designer, you know, and he's got an enormous house up in the Palisades. Lives

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by himself, except for a sweet young butler-valet."

"What's this collection of his?"

"Ivey collects commemorative plates, gold and silver plates celebrating the winning of the West or the wedding anniversary of the Queen of Rumania and similar memorable occasions," continued Thorne. "He's got about five hundred of the damn things."

"Worth how much?"

"At least a half million, I'd estimate. I've already contacted a fence, through some of my store connections, who specializes in this kind of stuff. He'll give us $80,000."

"That's a pretty small piece of half a million," Buzz pointed out.

"It's $40,000 each, for a few hours' work."

Grinning, Buzz said, "True, it's more than I make in a whole week at Ulrich's Foreign Motors in Westwood. Still, I think we could get a hundred thou if we pushed the guy."

Thorne's lips pressed together. "Don't be a stupid jerk, Buzz. I need that money. If you—" He started to get up.

"You're supposed to be practicing control, remember?" Buzz pushed him back down with a hand on his shoulder. "Take it easy."

Thorne didn't answer. He turned away, watching the ocean. Far out, nearly at the horizon, white sailboats were slicing by.

"Okay," Buzz said. "I'll settle for $40,000. Now, how do we—"

"I'm sorry," Thorne said. "It's just that I'm tired of living on $9,000 a year. And Amanda's getting tired of me. Like tonight, she claims she's going to a lecture on primal psychology in Santa Monica."

"Maybe she is."

"Sure, maybe." Thorne sighed, digging at the sand with his thumb again. "Ivey showed me his collection. He's got it in cases in a big room on the ground floor of his place."

"With a burglar-alarm system," Buzz said, "to protect it."

"It's a primitive alarm setup, I don't know what some of these guys can be thinking about. All we have to do is cut his electric feed lines and the system goes blooey."

"The cops won't get an automatic warning?"

"Nope. I checked the whole thing out while Ivey was showing me his gardens. He's also a flower nut."

"Those he can keep." Buzz locked his hands over his knees. "When can we hit the place?"

"Next Wednesday or Thursday night."

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"Why then?" Buzz asked him.

"Ivey and the sweet-face valet are going down to Palm Springs for a couple days. Place will be empty. Ivey's counting on his stupid alarm system to look after everything."

"Let's make it Thursday," said Buzz. "I've got a date for Wednesday."

"For $40,000 you can skip a date."

"If we do it Thursday I can have the girl and the forty thou, too."

"Okay, Thursday, then. We'll get together once more before then and work out the final details," Thorne said. "Oh, do you want to have dinner tonight? Amanda's going to be out, and—"

"Not tonight. I've got something else planned. Maybe tomorrow after work we can get together. I'll phone you at the bookstore." Buzz grinned. "Try to keep calm until we pull this one off. Okay?"

"Don't worry. I feel good about this job. When I feel good I don't have any trouble with my temper."

Buzz hummed the song again.

Thorne slammed down the phone. He shoved the instrument across the phone table until it smacked into the wall of the apartment. "Stupid jerk. Doesn't she have any imagination when it comes to lying? That Wednesday night series of concerts at UCLA ended two weeks ago."

He stalked into the livingroom, which looked out on the apartment-complex parking lot. There was a hot, dry wind blowing tonight and it swept drive-in discards of paper cups and plates and crumpled cigarette packs across the pitted asphalt. Thorne kicked a hassock. "Damn it," he said. "She couldn't have been where she said she was last night." He kicked out at the coffee table, sending a cascade of magazines and ash trays to the floor.

Three thumps sounded from beneath the floor. It was old Glover, protesting the noise.

"Stupid jerk," muttered Thorne. He took a deep, angry breath.

After stomping around the floor a few minutes longer, ignoring old Glover's thumps, Thorne got control of himself. "This is the night of the job. I've got to hold my temper." He slowed, then stopped.

Bending, and gathering up the debris from the coffee table, he noticed a brand-new matchbook. On its cover, in silver letters, was printed: *Why Not?*

Thorne straightened. His fingers tightened around the book of

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matches. "That's that club down in San Amaro," he said. "Hangout for swingers. Amanda and I have never been to a place like that. In fact, we haven't even been in San Amaro for over a year." His hand turned into a fist. He jammed the match folder into his pocket. "At least *I* haven't."

This, though, was the night of the raid on Kenneth Ivey's plate collection, and Thorne had promised himself he'd keep his temper under control. The job tonight would net him $40,000, more than he'd clear in years of working in the bookstore.

He knelt, took care of the rest of the mess. When Amanda came home fifteen minutes later he was able to smile at her, kiss her gently on the cheek. He brought it off very well. She never sensed his anger.

The hot dry wind brushed at the big silent house, rattling and twisting the ivy. The decorative green shutters ticked, dead leaves spun down out of the trees to go skittering across the moonlit flagstones of the patio.

They'd cut the necessary wires five minutes ago. Now the two men were cautiously approaching the back of Ivey's home. The dark house was empty. You could sense it.

Buzz eased up to a French window, tried the metal handle. "Locked," he said in a low voice. From a leather pouch hung around his neck he selected a pick. In less than a minute he had the door standing open.

"The stuff is in the room across from this one." Thorne stepped across the threshold. Out of the pocket of his black Windbreaker he drew a flashlight. He followed its circle of yellow across the rich Oriental rug and out into a shadowy corridor.

Buzz, carrying two black satchels, followed.

Pushing open a white door, Thorne said, "In here."

The room was large. Glass-doored trophy cases lined the walls. The gold and silver commemorative plates sparkled as the beam of the flashlight touched them.

Thorne started toward the nearest case. He bumped into a small table, nudging a heavy metal-based lamp to the floor. His flash got knocked from his gloved hand, rolled away across the floor, blinked off and went under one of the cases. "Damn it," he said.

Buzz set the satchels down. "Here. Light a match and find it."

Grabbing the matchbook, Thorne tore one out and lit it. He took one step forward before stop-

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ping still. The matchbook cover said: *Why Not?* "You stupid jerk," he shouted. "That's why you couldn't do this job last night. That's why you weren't free Sunday night."

"Quiet down. What the hell are you talking about?"

Thorne made a groaning, snarling sound. He dropped the lighted match and it seemed to take long seconds to drift down to the rug. Grabbing up the heavy lamp, he charged at Buzz. "Stupid jerk. It's been you and Amanda all this time. You just sat there while—"

"Hold off." Buzz backed across the dark room. "Suppose I have spent a little time with—"

"Suppose?" Thorne gave a roar and dived for his partner. He swung the lamp and hit Buzz against the side of the head. "You've been seeing her and seeing her." He hit him twice more, then once again.

Buzz moaned. He began to sway. The next blow of the lamp base knocked him sprawling to the floor.

Thorne followed him down through the darkness, hitting out with the lamp. "Well, that'll never happen no more, Buzz. No more."

When he realized Buzz was dead Thorne stood up.

"I wasn't supposed to lose my temper," he said. His feet hit the floor hard as he paced. "Now it's all fouled up. I won't get the $40,000 or . . . Wait a minute." His eyes were used to the room now. He located the two satchels. "Now it's going to be $80,000 for me alone, nothing for Buzz."

He went to the first case, tried to open it. It was locked. "Buzz is the one who was good with locks." Thorne swung out with a gloved hand and smashed the glass.

Reaching in, he grabbed a gold plate, then another. He began to stuff them into a satchel.

There wouldn't be any trouble as long as he kept calm.

Thorne was driving Buzz' sports car along the coast highway. It was nearly midnight. In the trunk were the two bagfuls of gold and silver plates. He hadn't been able to cram the whole Ivey collection into the satchels, but he knew he had enough to net a profit of at least $50,000 for himself. Fifty thou, as Buzz would say.

Buzz was in the trunk, too, wrapped up in two big plastic garbage bags Thorne had found in the Ivey pantry. He'd had a tough time getting everything into the trunk. A little foreign car was a stupid thing to buy. The trunk door wouldn't shut right the first

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time and he'd had to shift Buzz around some, but there shouldn't be any trouble. He'd drive the car to the canyon where Buzz had his ramshackle cottage. There were several nice sharp curves along the rim of a gully there. Everybody knew Buzz liked to drive fast. So, he'd unwrap him, put him behind the wheel, and let him go over the cliff.

"First removing the gold and silver, of course," Thorne said.

He'd have a long talk with Amanda. He'd been meaning to do that anyway. Explain that he had all the money now and Buzz was dead. Knowing Amanda, he was fairly certain she'd choose to stay with him—even help him cook up an alibi for tonight, not that he'd probably need one.

There was still a lot of traffic on U.S. 1. Just as he was passing an open seaside restaurant, a gray sports car roared by on his left, cut suddenly in front of him and went squealing into the black parking lot.

"Stupid jerk!" Thorne's face glowed and he felt hot. "Could have killed me."

He swung the car off the road and drove toward the gray car. He stopped a few yards from the other vehicle, leaped out of his seat and went running toward the other driver. "You stupid jerk," he yelled. "You came damn near to smashing into—"

The man in the gray car was fat and had a bristly moustache. "Forgot to set your hand brake."

"What?"

"You didn't put on your emergency brake when you stopped."

Thorne turned. Buzz' sports car was rolling, picking up speed as it headed down across the parking lot. Thorne began chasing after the car.

It rolled faster and faster. Then it went slamming into a station wagon. The trunk lid popped open.

Buzz came falling out first. After him came one of the satchels. Its lock unsnapped and a single gold plate clanged to the ground.

"Stupid jerk," said Thorne.

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There are times when one's faults are so nearly virtues, it may be wise to ignore them.

A Slight Case of Suspicion

by William Jeffrey

Agnes came away from our livingroom window and sat down next to me on the sectional. "George," she said, "there's a *For Sale* sign on the Websters' front lawn."

I glanced up from my paper. "Oh?"

"A realtor came out this afternoon and put it up."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," I said, "Harry and Madge, for all their shortcomings, were pretty decent neighbors."

Agnes didn't answer immediately; she had that look in her eyes that women get when they've been ruminating on something for any length of time. "They're supposed to be on vacation at Lake Placid," she said finally. "Now, why would they decide to sell their home while they're away like that?"

I put down the paper. "Agnes, how many times have I told you to keep your nose out of other people's affairs?"

She chose to ignore that. "I suppose it could be that they decided to go through with their divorce," she said meditatively.

I blinked. "What divorce? I didn't know they were getting a divorce."

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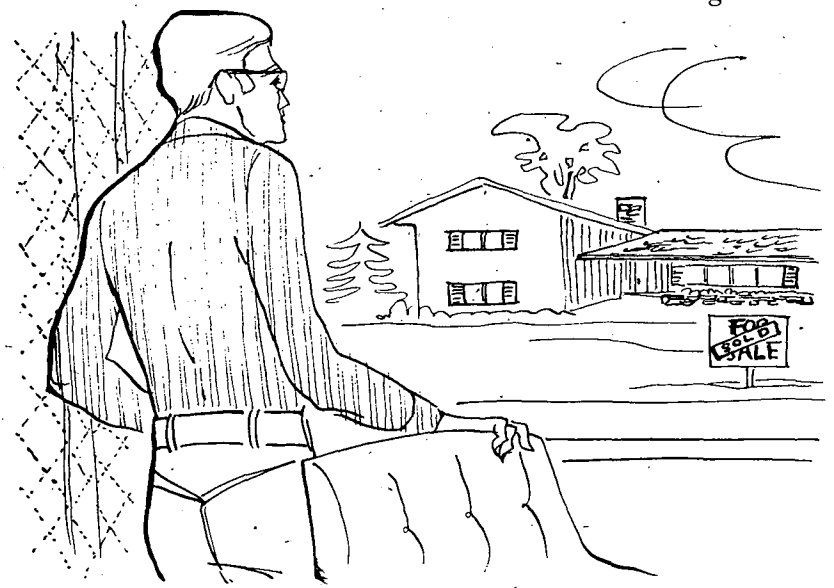
"Oh, I don't really know if they *are* or not. But they fought so often, they must have talked about a divorce at some time or other." She frowned, and I knew she'd just had another thought. "George, did you see poor Madge Webster leave?"



"No," I said. "And what do you mean by poor? Madge and Harry have more money in those antiques Harry has collected than you or I will ever see."

"I meant the way she was treated, poor thing."

"Ha!" I said. "Wasn't it last week you were lamenting about how terrible it was the way *she* walked all over *him*?"

She gave me her long-suffering-wife look. "Now, George, I never said that at all."

I couldn't see any point in arguing with her. "Anyway, what does it matter whether or not I saw Madge leave?"

"Alice Turner told me her husband Sam was talking to Fred Brooks, and Fred plays golf with Harry on weekends. It seems Harry told Fred that Madge was going up to Lake Placid ten days before *he* was because he had some kind of business deal to complete."

I looked at her, trying to decipher that. When I thought I had, I said, "So what?"

"Well, don't you *see*, George? Why would Madge want to go up

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to Lake Placid all by herself? There's no one near their cabin for miles and miles."

"Listen, Agnes," I said, "what are you leading up to? Why have you all of a sudden taken such an interest in the Websters' personal lives? Or should I say, why have you taken any more than your usual interest?"

"Because," she said in a flat and ominous tone, "I think something may have *happened* to Madge Webster."

I stared at her incredulously.

"I don't like to say it," she went on, "but I have a strong suspicion that Harry has . . . done away with her."

I jumped to my feet and hovered over her. "All right, that's enough. This business of your interfering in the lives of our neighbors has gotten way out of hand. I've known Harry Webster for six years now, and there's not a nicer, more mild-mannered guy anywhere. I won't have you spreading any kind of malicious nonsense—"

"But it's *not* nonsense, George!"

"The very idea of it is damned foolishness. Now, I don't want to hear any more about it. Is that understood?"

She avoided my eyes. "Yes."

"Fine," I said shortly, thinking that was the end of it.

I should have known better.

I had some errands to do the following Saturday morning—two days later—and it was just past noon when I returned home. Agnes had lunch ready. She waited until I had a mounded forkful of her German potato salad before she said, "The Websters' house has been sold."

I mumbled something about it being a very quick sale.

"George," she said, "I went over there and talked to Mr. Garner."

"Who's Mr. Garner?"

"The realtor. He was there this morning while you were out, putting a *Sold* sticker across the sign."

"I thought I told you—"

"Why would Harry Webster sell his house in such a hurry?" she continued rapidly. "He always said he liked it here, didn't he? Madge always said she wouldn't live anywhere else, didn't she? Well, I asked Mr. Garner and he said Harry came to see him a few days ago and asked him to put the house on the market immediately—that Harry was leaving the state and moving back East." She paused for effect. "*And* he said that Harry told him to get whatever he could for the property. The buyer Mr. Garner found offered fifty-five thousand, and when Harry called yesterday to check

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on progress and Mr. Garner told him about the offer, Harry said that was fine and to go ahead and close the deal."

Now, that did strike me as odd. I knew for a fact that Harry Webster's house was worth anywhere from seventy to eighty thousand; and I also knew for a fact that Harry had always been one to buy right and sell dear. I said, "I can't imagine Harry taking that much of a loss on his house."

"Well, can you imagine him putting all of his precious antiques up for immediate auction?"

I frowned. "How's that?"

Agnes' eyes were bright. "Yes. Mr. Garner said that Harry made arrangements to have some movers come out and take everything to the auction yard. According to what he told Mr. Garner, he has a chance to get in on some sort of lucrative business deal back East and needs to raise all the cash he can in a hurry."

On the surface that sounded plausible enough, and yet—and Agnes knew this as well as I—it was damned odd that Harry would sell *all* of his antiques unless he was absolutely forced to do so. As much as he loved to make a dollar, he practically worshiped some of those period pieces of his.

Agnes said, "Well, George?"

"Well what?" I barked at her.

"Do you believe me now?"

"Believe you about what?"

"That Harry has done away with Madge, that's what!"

"Now look, Agnes, we're not going to start *that* again—"

"It's the only possible explanation," she said. "Face the facts, George: Madge has disappeared, and nobody saw her leave; I asked around the neighborhood just to make sure. Now, the Madge I know wouldn't trust Harry alone for ten hours, let alone ten days, so that rules out her going to Lake Placid by herself. But Harry said that's where she went and there's no way we can find out for sure without going all the way up there because they don't have a phone at their cabin. So why would Harry lie, unless he had killed her? And why would he sell his house, and put his antiques up for auction, unless he had killed her? And why—"

"Would you mind telling me," I said acidly, "why Harry Webster would kill his wife?"

"He always used to brag about how many women he had when he was younger," my wife said. "If you ask me, he's keeping some platinum blonde hussy in a downtown apartment—which is where he probably is right now, and not up at Lake Placid at all."

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"All that talk about Harry's boyhood conquests is just that: talk. Besides, he's sixty, bald, and fat!"

She gave me a patronizing look. "Some wench wouldn't care about his physical appearance, George. All she *would* care about is his money. Don't be naive."

What was the use? "All right," I said, "all right. Let's just suppose for one wild moment that you're right. What do you expect me to do? Call the police and tell them Harry Webster has sold his house and that's proof he did away with his wife?"

"You could go over there and look around."

"What for?"

"George, this may sound silly to you, but I think Madge's body is somewhere in that house! I have a feeling . . ."

I took a long, slow breath. Then, calmly, logically, I said, "Agnes, if Harry were going to do away with her, the more probable place would be up at Lake Placid, don't you think? It's a pretty isolated area, and there wouldn't be a chance in a million of anyone finding a body in that wilderness."

"The way I have it figured," she said, sounding like one of those detectives in crime-puzzle novels, "Harry didn't really *plan* to murder Madge at all. He probably asked her for a divorce, so he could marry his hussy, and she refused—you know how Madge was—and then they had a terrible argument and he hit her with the fireplace poker—"

"They don't have a fireplace," I interrupted.

"Well, whatever. And then he panicked and hid her body someplace, down in the cellar probably . . ."

"You're forgetting," I told her, "that Harry only left three days ago, and that Madge left ten days before that. So if he *had* killed her in a fit of anger, he would have had ten days to wrap her body in something, put it in the trunk of their car, and dispose of it. After all, if he's having some moving company come in and remove all of the belongings, he wouldn't be likely to leave any bodies around for the movers to find."

"George," she said thinly, "I don't care what *you* say, *I* know what I know. If you don't go over to the Websters' and have a look around, then I will."

"Go ahead," I told her.

"All right, I'll do just that."

I suppose she would actually have gone, if at that moment the telephone hadn't rung. Agnes spent five seconds debating, decided on the phone (you never

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knew who might be calling with what choice bit of information), and hurried to the kitchen where one of our extensions was situated. I took the opportunity to escape to the livingroom.

I sat on the sectional and tried to read the paper. I couldn't seem to concentrate. The power of suggestion can wreak havoc on a normally sane man's mind at times and, in spite of my own logical arguments, I found myself mulling over Agnes' melodramatic suspicions. Finally, I stood and walked to the front window and gazed across the street.

The large *For Sale* sign was prominent, along with the bright-red *Sold* sticker across it, on the Websters' almost golf-course-quality front lawn. I stared at it, and the more I stared at it, the harder it was for me to believe that Harry was selling the place so cheaply, and all his antiques in the bargain, just to raise cash for a business venture. Could it be, damn it, that for once in her life Agnes was right? Could it really be that Harry was getting rid of everything to finance a disappearing act to, say, South America (with some blonde), because he had murdered his wife?

I rationalized, without considering the implications of such an act, that a quick look around the Webster house would do no harm. Agnes had not reappeared, which meant she was still on the phone. I thought about telling her what I was about to do, and decided the wisest course was to say nothing until I either proved or, more probably, disproved her theory. Then, before I could change my mind, I left our house and crossed the sunlit street.

As I walked up the Websters' wide, asphalt drive, I found myself casting furtive glances up and down the street. I felt like a character in an old Bogart movie. Still, having come this far, I ignored the misgivings I had begun to feel, decided against trying the wide double front doors—they would surely be locked—and went around to the side. There, I gently rattled the French windows. They, too, were of course locked.

Well, I realized belatedly and with some relief, if all the doors and windows are locked, I can't get inside—and I refuse to *break* in—but my legs carried me right along to the rear, where I tried the kitchen door. It was bolted, but luckily (or unluckily) the door had not been securely fitted to the jamb. When I jiggled the brass knob, it abruptly popped inward a few inches, creaking. An ice cube slithered along my spine; I would have made a very lousy burglar.

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Don't do it, I told myself—and went inside anyway.

Harry's extensive collection of period pieces and priceless antiques gave the place an Augustan hallowedness, much like a museum. As quietly as I walked, my steps echoed on the parqueted floor. Cursing myself for a damned fool, but forging onward nonetheless, I looked around downstairs. There was nothing to find; the place was no different than I remembered it from the many times I had been a guest there.

I thought about climbing the massive, spiraling staircase to the second floor, remembered what Agnes had said about the cellar, and went into the kitchen. I opened the cellar door, clicked on the lights, and descended.

Harry had made the cellar into a playroom, workshop, and storage area for his not inconsiderable liquor supply. My eyes fell on his workbench, the arrangement of power tools there—and I had a grisly and totally irrational mental image of Harry using his circular saw on Madge, then whittling her down on the lathe into another of his antiques. Somehow that thought had a sobering effect on me; I was now firmly convinced that I had allowed myself to be talked into paranoia.

Enough of this, I thought. *Back home you go, friend.* Quickly, I ascended the stairs. I had just pushed open the door, and was starting through when I happened to glance down the long center hallway; the double front doors were swinging inward.

My stomach turned over. Oh, this is fine—just dandy. If that's Harry, I'll never be able to explain my presence inside the house; and if it's the new owners, or the realtor, or the movers, I can plan on spending some time in jail for breaking and entering. I pressed against the wall inside the cellar door, my heart thudding loudly, and peered through the slit.

Two men dressed in the white coveralls of movers came inside. I groaned silently, They paused, glancing about. One of them said, "Where do you want to start, Max?"

"Doesn't make any difference," the other one answered. They walked deeper into the livingroom, out of my vision.

Through the open front doors, I could see that a large van, with its tailgate down, was backed up to the porch, where the drive looped around in front. From somewhere in the livingroom there were two distinct grunts, and then the two men came back into view carrying the large Louis

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XIV writing desk, of which Harry was so proud.

I waited until they had gotten the desk up onto the van; then I left my place of concealment, thinking that this was as good a time as any to make my escape.

It wasn't, however.

I was sneaking across the kitchen toward the door through which I had entered earlier, feeling guilty as hell, when a hoarse shout sounded behind me. I froze in mid-sneak; they had apparently seen me through the open hallway.

There was the sound of running steps; then a cold, hard voice demanded, "Who the hell are you?"

Well, George, I told myself, *let's see how good and how fast a talker you are.* I took a deep breath and turned slowly, intending to smile and start out by giving my name. The smile froze on my mouth, and the words never got out of my throat. The mover nearest me was holding the largest, blackest pistol I had ever seen in my life.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Nobody's supposed to be in here."

"I . . . I . . . I live across the street. My wife . . ."

"Well, it doesn't make any difference," the other mover said, "who he is or what he's doing here. You had to go and pull that damned gun of yours, Max. Don't you think he's wondering what a couple of moving men are doing with guns?"

I wasn't wondering anything at all; I was too busy staring at that gun. Now the thought, having been planted, began to grow in my mind. Moving men with guns? Why would moving men have guns?

"What do we do now, Nick?" Max, the one with the pistol, asked.

"I don't know," Nick answered. "Let me think a minute."

"Listen," I said in a small voice, "listen, I just came over here because my wife—"

"Shut up," Nick said.

I started to say something, but another look at the pistol made me think better of it. I closed my mouth.

In that moment of silence, I heard the first distant, approaching wail of sirens.

The movers heard it, too. "What's that?" Max said.

Nick ran into the livingroom and looked out through the doors and beyond the truck. He turned, his face suddenly damp, and shouted, "Cops!" and started for the porch.

"Cops!" the other one echoed, and forgot all about me. He ran

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out to the porch, joining Nick, and the two of them jumped inside the moving van.

I stood there in the middle of the kitchen floor. I heard the coughing roar of the van's engine, and then saw it shoot away from the porch and down the drive out of my line of vision. A moment later there was the high, keening squeal of hurriedly-applied brakes, and a rattling, thumping sound, and the howl of sirens increased to air-raid proportions. Doors slammed, men shouted, and there was a booming volley of pistol shots.

I thought I ought to get out there and see what was happening, but for some strange reason my legs wouldn't work. I was still standing in the same spot when two blue-uniformed men appeared in the front doorway, each of them with a drawn gun.

They saw me immediately, of course, and rushed to where I stood. One of them told me not to move, which was unnecessary under the circumstances. The other one patted my clothing quickly. I was then ushered unceremoniously out to the front porch.

Dimly, I was aware of mass confusion on our normally quiet street; neighbors milled about, and more police cars were arriving with much flashing of red lights and howling of sirens. I saw that the moving van had veered off onto Harry's nice green lawn, most likely to avoid crashing broadside into the patrol car that was angled across the drive.

Then, over the excited voices, I heard somebody yell, "George!"

Agnes came running up the drive and reached my side. "Oh, George!" she wailed.

"You know this guy, lady?" one of the policemen asked.

"He's my husband," Agnes said.

"What's he doing here?"

"I have no idea," Agnes said. She turned to me. "What are you doing here, George?"

"I . . . They . . ."

Suddenly, Agnes' eyes grew very round. "It was you!"

"What's that?" the patrolman asked sharply.

"It was George!" Agnes shouted. "It was George I saw sneaking into the Websters' house!"

"What?" I said. I was still a little dazed.

"I had just hung up the phone and was in the livingroom when I happened to look through the front window," she said. "I saw a man fumbling at the French windows over here but the sun was in my eyes and I couldn't see clearly and that's why I didn't recognize you, George, and then I went

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looking for you but you weren't there because you were over here, so I called the police and told them I had seen a prowler, and all about how Harry Webster must have murdered his wife, and then that moving van came and I just knew there would be shooting and that's why I told the sergeant to send as many men as he could . . ."

She paused to take a breath, which gave the policeman time to say again, "What's that?"

While she was explaining it to him a second time, I closed my eyes, feeling suddenly very, very tired. I still didn't know what it was all about; all I *did* know was that Agnes, in one way or another, was the catalyst responsible for setting off the bombshell. Wasn't that enough?

I stood there numbly, listening to the impassioned voice of my wife, and fervently, desperately wished that her parents had never entertained the thought of having children.

Or, for that matter, mine.

It turned out, of course, that Harry Webster had not murdered his wife. It also turned out that he did not have a platinum blonde hussy in a downtown apartment (Harry snickered wistfully upon hearing this), and that he had not put his house or his antiques up for sale. We learned that much when he and Madge were summoned home from Lake Placid that night. They had been on vacation, you see, just as they'd told us. The reason Madge had gone up to their cabin prior to Harry, aside from the fact that he really did have a business deal to complete, was so that she could restore some sort of antediluvian bric-a-brac as a surprise birthday present for him.

Agnes didn't seem overjoyed to discover that Madge was, after all, alive; and after Madge learned of my wife's suspicions, she flatly refused to allow Agnes inside her home again. However, Harry confided to me later that he was damned glad Agnes was as "inquisitive" as she was; and I really couldn't blame him, after I'd got the full story in the papers the day following all the excitement.

According to the report, the whole business had been a plot to steal Harry Webster's substantial collection of antiques. A man named Edmonds, who dealt in stolen *objets d'art*, knew about Harry's collection by reputation. Through a contact working in the circulation department of a local newspaper, he also knew when Harry left to join Madge at Lake Placid; Harry had telephoned to

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stop his paper delivery. Some simple checking had then revealed how long the Websters planned to be gone, and how completely isolated they were at Lake Placid.

Pretending to be a realtor named Garner, Edmonds hired an answering service so that if anybody became curious and called, his "realty operation" would seem perfectly legitimate. Then he came out to our neighborhood and put up the bogus *For Sale* sign. After two days, to make everything seem on the up and up, he came out again and put the *Sold* sticker across the sign.

When I read this to Agnes, she said, "Oh, and when I went over there to talk to Mr. Garner—I mean, Mr. Edmonds—and he told me that some movers were coming to pick up Harry's belongings—"

"You did exactly what he was hoping one of the neighbors would do," I finished for her. "It says here that Edmonds thought that when the moving van arrived and his men began to load the antiques, people would remember what 'the realtor' had said and think nothing of the van. He *wanted* you to spread the news."

"It would have worked, too," Agnes said, "if I hadn't been suspicious of what was going on."

"You were suspicious of something totally unrelated and totally false," I told her. "And the word, anyway, is nosy. I hope you've learned your lesson, Agnes. This business of prying and snooping into other people's private affairs can lead to nothing but more trouble. Do you realize that you almost got me killed yesterday?"

When she didn't answer, I lowered the paper. She was at the window, peering out past the drawn drapes.

"Agnes," I said, knowing I was, as I had been for the past fifteen years, fighting a losing battle. "Agnes, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, dear," she answered. "It's just that the window in the Keyes' upstairs bedroom is wide open. Now, you know they left last Thursday to attend the wedding of Louise's half-sister in Minneapolis . . ."

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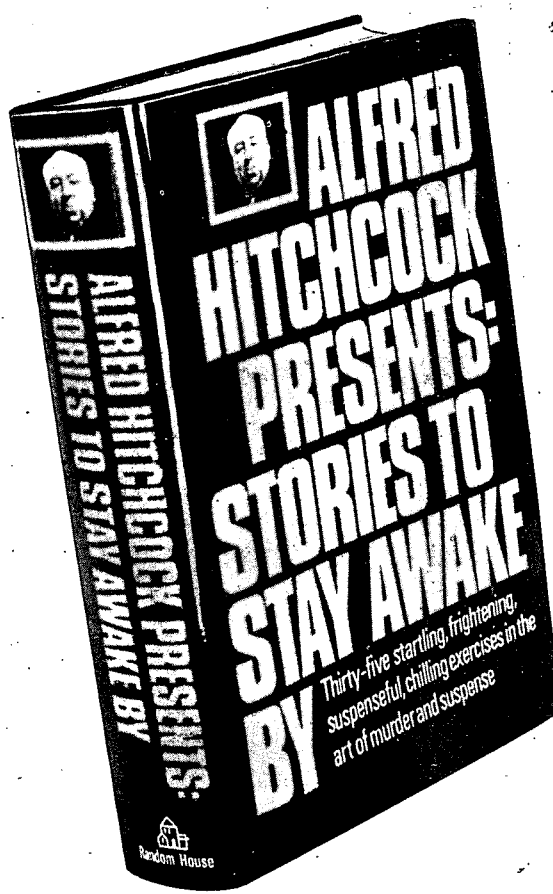
WHILE THEY LAST

BIG

MONEY SAVING OFFER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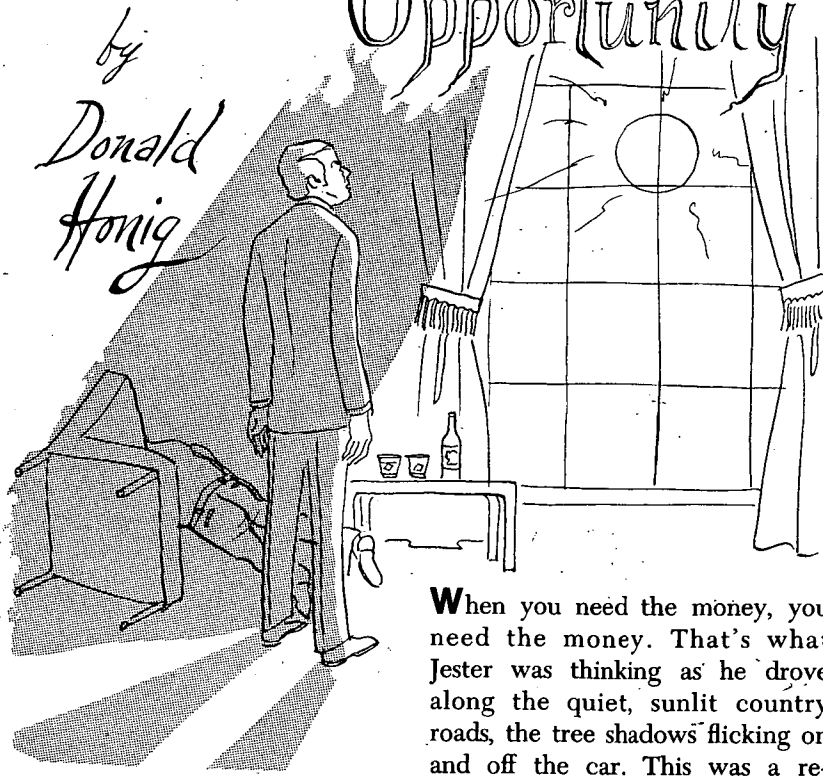
Just when one thinks he's had it, he may find he has.

A Passing Opportunity

by Donald Honig



When you need the money, you need the money. That's what Jester was thinking as he drove along the quiet, sunlit country roads, the tree shadows flicking on and off the car. This was a re-

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freshingly different place in which to plot a murder, compared to some dim, sleazy bar.

He was out of the area of garden apartments now, and the sun seemed even brighter and warmer as he drove into an area of six-figure homes hidden from the road by walled and thickly wooded grounds.

Jester had been ambitious as a young man; but his ambitions had been leavened by modesty and shaped to certain limits. After college he had hoped for a junior-executive job with a good, progressive company, something that promised a decent future. His sights were on, say, a $50,000 home, something comfortable, of which a man could be proud.

He had been too eager, however. He had looked for the shortcuts, and they had not existed—at least not for him. Maybe it was being drafted after college and going off to war—the one in Korea. That had taken two years out of his life. The world seemed different when he came home. A junior-exec job didn't seem to hold the same promise, the same glamour; or maybe it was getting married too soon, before he had established himself.

Elena was all right, a good wife, a good mother, but she hadn't pushed him hard enough, he felt. He'd had the tendency to let things slide, rather than take a strong hand. A man had to push and keep pushing, all the time—otherwise this hard-nosed, competitive world swallowed him.

The job he had taken in the department store, as floor manager, was supposed to be a stopgap thing while he bided his time and waited for the big opportunity to come along. Then, once the kids had been born, his fate and his future were sealed. He couldn't afford to take any chances. So there he was, stuck forever as a floor manager, living in a five-room apartment, while the alumni bulletin came in every year telling about how well his old classmates were doing in the world: lawyers, doctors, men of industry. He finally stopped reading the bulletin. It was too depressing.

He'd been told the estate would be exactly twelve miles from the bridge. There would be nothing visible from the road—not a name, not a mailbox—simply an unmarked driveway twelve miles from the bridge. It was just about twelve miles now and he began looking for the driveway.

These people know how to live, he reflected wistfully. He couldn't hope ever to aspire to their grandeur, but they were supplementing his income nicely. Fifteen

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hundred here, two thousand there—it was adding up. Elena knew nothing about it, of course. One day there might be enough money for a house, a better life, if it weren't all eaten up sending the kids through college. He would tell her he won it at the track, or that some distant relative had left it to him. It wouldn't matter. She never asked questions.

He came to the driveway and turned in. Soon the trees thinned out and he was cruising past a broad, well-manicured lawn. In the distance he could see the enormous Tudor mansion.

Seeing the house, seeing how "they" lived, he decided he would charge them plenty for this job. He knew they didn't like to dicker, but he would at least try to bump the fee up a few thousand. Murder, in this case, was a business and, like any other business, negotiation ought to be permissible.

He supposed that, in a perverse way, there was prestige in what he was doing, even though the world could never know about it. They didn't select just anybody for these jobs. He had started at the bottom and worked his way up. The beginning had been simple enough: a casual conversation in a bar informed him that "somebody" wanted a guy roughed up. Jester had been middleweight champion in college, had always stayed in shape, had learned karate and judo. The pay was $200. It seemed good pay for simple enough work. After all, he had seen men killed in Korea, so he was hardly put off by a bit of violence—and money was money.

He handled his assignment with such skill that his employer was impressed. The calls started to come in now and then for similar work. People asked who he was. His expertise with firearms—learned in the service—and his cold-blooded attitude were duly noted.

A few months later, the seemingly innocuous floorwalker was doubling as a hired killer. He received $1500 for his first job and $2000 for the second. They were carried off neatly and efficiently. The newspapers called each "a professional job." Jester was flattered, but the pay was hardly commensurate with the risks. He was getting small-time money for big-time work. It seemed symbolic of his whole life.

When he pulled up in front of the house a stocky, muscular man was waiting for him. "You're late," he said.

Jester looked at his watch. "Five minutes."

"Five minutes late," the man

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mimicked him in a surly tone.

Jester followed him into the house. As they walked along the carpeted hallway he couldn't help gaping at everything—the winding staircase, the polished mirrors, the mahogany furniture . . . All he wanted was about a tenth of this. He was willing to settle for a modest house in the country somewhere, and just a bit of security. The old dream had risen so often in the past that it seemed to have a whining quality inside his head, a foredoomed thing refusing to die.

He was ushered into a large livingroom and left alone there with Mr. Laughlin. Laughlin was his contact. Generally they met in quiet, back-street restaurants. Being called out here, Jester knew, was flattering, a sort of pat on the back—but try putting it in the bank.

"Sit down, Jester," Laughlin said. He was a slender man, with smoothly combed white hair. He was wearing an expensive suit and had a diamond ring on each pinkie.

Jester took a seat in a deep leather chair. Laughlin remained standing.

"We want you to hit somebody next week," Laughlin said. "He'll be in town, at the Marana Hotel. It has to be done well."

"I've never let you down yet, have I?"

Laughlin laughed softly. "You wouldn't be here if you had," he said.

His words gave Jester an uncomfortable feeling. Since he himself was devoid of compassion, he understood that trait in others; he understood it only too well.

He began to feel a sense of withdrawal from this whole scene. Supposedly every man is given at least one opportunity in life to succeed and make something of himself and find the pride and security which all men need. It had never happened to him. He had not even been given the chance to fail.

"His name is Curt Madison," Laughlin said. "He's a big shot from the Midwest." Laughlin went on, telling certain things about Curt Madison, but Jester had stopped listening. He didn't have to hear. He knew it all. He could have told Laughlin more about Curt Madison than Laughlin ever dreamed of knowing.

The face reared up in his memory: tall, good-looking Curt Madison, scion of an immensely wealthy family that controlled vast industrial interests. When he had been still reading the alumni bulletins, Jester would read about Curt giving large sums of money

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to the school for a gymnasium, a library, a lecture hall.

Jester had a wry feeling. Whenever he was brooding and feeling sorry for himself, he would think of Curt Madison, of all the Curt Madisons of the world—men who had been born to it, given every advantage at birth, who'd had the road paved for them, their entire lives securely and comfortably arranged.

Now Jester felt a malicious pleasure at the thought of putting the finish to one of these lives. Curt had never been a friend of his. Curt had lived in a different world—pledged into the right fraternity, driving a low-slung sports car, dating the campus beauties, never concerned about studying, about graduating, about the future.

"You'll get three thou for this," Laughlin said.

"Don't you think I ought to get a bit more?" Jester asked. He was going to add that since Madison was an old friend of sorts, there should be some bonus for the suspension of sentimentality, but he kept his mouth shut. If Laughlin learned of the old relationship, Jester could be pulled off the job. These people took no chances.

Laughlin was staring at him, shrewdly, critically. "Maybe," he said quietly, tentatively. "If you do a clean job, there might be a bonus. Maybe five hundred. Maybe."

Jester shrugged. "It isn't important," he said.

He wondered vaguely, as he drove back, what Curt could have done to warrant execution. It couldn't be about money. The man was too rich for that. Anyway, Jester decided, if a man like Curt Madison, who had it all, couldn't manage his life successfully, then he didn't deserve any sympathy.

Jester's problem now was to figure the best way of handling the job. Right inside the hotel might be the easiest way. A hotel had a lot of anonymity; a body could remain undiscovered for as long as twenty-four hours. It was probably safer than taking a chance outside.

The morning of the day of the job—he was taking a few hours off from the department store—Jester put into his pocket a glassine envelope containing a tiny white vial. The vial contained a lethal poison which, when dropped into a liquid, would dissolve in seconds. It was tasteless, colorless—and deadly. Inside of five minutes the victim blacked out and died.

Jester had obtained a small supply of these vials from his employers. It was considered a much neater job if he could manage to

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slip the poison into the drink of an intended victim. The old style of gangland execution was red meat for the newspapers and made unpleasant headlines. The new people preferred the quieter, more subtle touch, when possible.

A call to the hotel that morning had confirmed that Curt Madison was indeed registered, and Jester began for the first time to get a somewhat involved feeling with the job. It wasn't that he had any particular fondness for Curt, but Curt was part of the past, and Jester had not thought about those days for so long he wondered if he might not be getting sentimental.

When he arrived at the hotel he realized he had no concrete plan for completing the job. While a hotel might be a good place to leave a corpse, it wasn't necessarily the best place to create one.

However, five minutes after he walked into the lobby of the hotel, it all seemed to be taken out of his hands. The moment he heard his name called and saw the brightly smiling, virtually unchanged face of Curt Madison coming toward him, hand outstretched, he knew that nothing was going to be as planned.

"If it isn't Jester!" Curt said.

They shook hands. Madison appeared as if he had detoured time. He was tall, tanned, expensively tailored.

"What are you doing here?" Madison asked. He seemed genuinely pleased.

"Just . . . I just came in for a drink;" Jester said.

"What a great surprise," Madison said. "Come on into the bar."

Together they went into the hotel's crowded cocktail lounge and took a table. The conversation flowed between past and present: What ever happened to so-and-so? Do you hear from what's-his-name? What are you doing now?

Jester found himself actually enjoying the conversation. They sat and re-created old experiences. It was as if they had been the greatest of friends back in college.

"How come you never show up at the reunions?" Madison asked.

Jester shrugged. Suddenly he became self-conscious about himself, his cheap suit, his inability to tell a big success story. He began to remember why he was there, what Curt Madison meant to him ultimately. He began to savor the situation: Curt Madison had it all, had everything; but he, Jester, had more—he was going to be alive that night, and Madison wasn't.

Occasionally Jester dropped his hand into his jacket pocket and felt the small glassine envelope,

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the vial inside it. It was going to have to be this method, which was just as well. He would not have liked the idea of having to shoot this man, in spite of it all, but it would be foolhardy to do anything in public. In fact, even talking to Madison like this was taking a risk—not that anyone was taking notice of them in the crowded, dimly lit lounge. Nevertheless, he would have to move the operation to private quarters.

"Curt," Jester said, "could we go up to your room? There's something I would like to discuss with you in private."

"Man, you are mysterious," Madison said, laughing. He looked at his watch. "Well, I've got a few phone calls to make anyway. Okay, let's go upstairs."

Madison had a suite of rooms on the top floor. When they got there he called room service for a bottle of Scotch.

"You're looking trim," Madison said as they waited for room service.

"I keep in shape," Jester said.

"You were the best middleweight the school ever had."

"I still work out in a gym once or twice a week."

"Physical fitness nut, eh?" Madison said with a grin.

"I believe in it," Jester said. The only thing at which he had ever excelled, the only thing that had ever brought him any glory in his life, was boxing. He had hated to see that glory pass, and so strove to recapture at least the shadows of it in the gym. His body was almost as hard and tough today as it had ever been.

"You're not doing too well, are you?" Madison asked, a certain seriousness in his voice. He sensed in Jester a reluctance to say why he had wanted to come upstairs to talk.

Jester shrugged. There was no reason to tell any lies; certainly not at this point.

"Well," Madison said, "I guess I've been lucky. Except for having been married three times." He laughed. "Not too lucky there, but I can't complain. Women are so damned available. I'm seeing someone tonight—I see her whenever I'm in town. Lovely person. Married."

"That's chancy, isn't it?" Jester asked.

Madison shrugged.

So that was probably it, Jester mused. Madison was fooling around with somebody's wife—the wife of the wrong person, apparently. Someone with connections. It was as simple as that.

When room service knocked, Jester excused himself to go to the bathroom. He did not want to be

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seen. He emerged after the waiter had gone. The drinks were set up on the table.

"You don't know how good it is to see one of the old faces," Madison said as they sat down. "Especially yours. I always admired you, Jester. I never missed one of your fights."

"Me neither," Jester said, lifting his glass.

"I envied you, you know. I wasn't much of an athlete, if you remember."

Jester remembered.

"You did it on your own," Madison said somewhat sadly. "I had it sort of . . . . easy." There was a moment of reflective silence. Madison seemed melancholy for a moment, as if sifting through old memories. Then he suddenly got up.

"I have to make those calls. I'll be just a few minutes. Don't get too far ahead," he said, pointing to the drinks and laughing. He went into the other room and closed the door.

It was going to be easier than he thought. Jester stared at Madison's drink. It was there, waiting, the sharp edges of ice melting into the Scotch.

Jester looked around. This suite probably cost as much per day as he paid per month for his apartment. Madison's expensive luggage lay open on the bed. All of those twenty-five-dollar shirts, those fifty-dollar shoes. Probably packed for him by a servant.

It was sordid, Jester reflected sardonically. He was caught in the middle. Knocking off a wife-stealer. His biggest payday; his biggest opportunity so far. If only . . . if only somewhere along the line something had come his way, just once. The old nagging dream again.

Sitting there in Madison's expensive suite, he felt smaller, older. He clenched his fist and looked at it. Even that opportunity had been denied him. He might have gone into the ring, but when he came out of the Army he had lost just enough. Nothing had ever worked out for him.

He lifted the glassine envelope from his pocket, shook free the vial, held it between his fingers for a moment, then leaned over and dropped the contents into Madison's drink. He watched the poison dissolve almost instantly and disappear with deadly innocence. Then he sat back and waited for Madison.

When Madison reappeared he came striding back to the table.

Jester lifted his glass and offered a toast. "To success," he said.

Madison drank to it, then put

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down his glass. He sat back and smiled at Jester.

"Seeing you again," Madison said, "makes me feel twenty years younger. You know that?"

Jester smiled thinly.

"Listen," Madison said. "I have an idea. I want you to come back and work for me. There's a real job for you out there. I've been thinking of setting up a physical fitness program for my employees. We've got thousands of them and they're getting fat and lazy. I think a company-sponsored fitness program would be good for them—and it wouldn't hurt the company's image either. And you're just the man to run it. What do you say?"

Jester stared blankly at him.

"I think it's a marvelous opportunity for all concerned," Madison said. He mentioned a healthy five-figure salary, company benefits, and other advantages. He was excited, enthused. Then his voice began to thicken and a puzzled look appeared on his face. He began to gasp, and his expression turned to panic.

Jester closed his eyes. A moment later he heard a soft thud upon the carpeted floor. When he opened his eyes he looked at Madison on the floor, at the overturned chair. He looked around the suite, at the sunshine pouring through the windows; glorious, wealthy sunshine. It never seemed to flood his own apartment quite that way, with that full golden sumptuousness.

Then he reached across the table for Madison's glass and drank it empty.

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The feminine soul, if one endorses Santayana, abounds "in intuition without method and passions without justice."

by Donald Olson

She hated his name, Francis, but he refused to be called Frank; he thought Francis had more dignity, and *more* dignity, in her opinion, was the last thing he needed. As they drove north from Pasadena in his air-conditioned car, she marveled at the differences between the man she loved and the man she'd married. Tad was young, Francis, old; Tad was handsome, Francis, plain; Tad was amusing, Francis, dull; Tad was poor, Francis, rich; Tad was life, Francis, death . . .

Death . . . No, she mustn't think about it, must pretend it wasn't even on her mind. The whole thing might be a mistake, a long, boring trip for no practical purpose, and yet she knew this was no more than superstitious ego-shielding against possible disappointment. In her heart she felt sure she could trust intuition, which was why she was now staking everything on the belief that what had happened once would happen a second time.

The first one's name had been Clarence Blashaw—she had a knack for picking men with names she detested. Not that she had been the one, exactly, who had picked him; that had been Moira's work. Moira was what the papers called a "society hostess," but she

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was also something else, a sort of elegant procuress, a matchmaker who arranged introductions for a fee; it had been she who'd introduced Lila to Clarence at a party in Santa Barbara. Less than a month later they had been on their way north, by plane that time—Clarence had been prone to car sickness—and she had shown him off to Aunt Affie and Aunt Phillippa and Cousin Sonny Joe, having felt it proper to offer something to Clarence in the way of a family. The two old aunts and the defective cousin were not the most prepossessing, but they were better than nothing.

"I'm going to marry Mr. Blashaw, darlings. He's frightfully rich. Well? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Instead of pleasing them, as she'd expected, her news had affected them like the first ominous rumblings of an earthquake, and it took a lot of subtle prompting to divine the cause of their distress: the quaint old things had been worried about Sonny Joe! They knew he would always have to be taken care of and they had counted not so much on their high-flying niece as on her money; money which would provide the protection Sonny Joe would need after they had gone to their reward.

Lila remembered all this as she and Francis were settling for the night in a motel south of San Francisco.

She kissed him on the forehead. "Don't be grumpy, darling. I know this trip's a nuisance for you."

Francis yawned. "Not at all, my dear. If it pleases you, then I'm happy."

"They're just two silly old ladies and a cousin who won't ever be right. But I'm all the family they have."

His homely face softened. "One more tribute to your goodness, my dear. Not everyone would make this trip just to tell them about her new husband."

She touched a warning finger to his lips. "Not husband, darling. Remember what I told you. They mustn't know we're already married. I'll write them a letter when we're back home and tell them."

He pinched her cheek. "Are they really such dragons?"

"Oh, not at all. They're really very sweet. You'll adore them."

"Then why can't we tell them we're married?" Especially at bedtime Francis was apt to be difficult. Lila tried to be patient.

"Because they're awfully sensitive. They take offense so easily. They're sure to feel slighted because we didn't invite them to the

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wedding, or at least tell them. So please, lover, don't let it slip out."

He went straight to bed and was soon snoring into his pillow, while she brushed her hair and gave him an occasional deprecating glance in the mirror; cigars and snoring, the rich man's syndrome. She got into bed and thought about Tad, so bronzed and handsome, looking almost as much like a young Apollo in his gas-station attendant's uniform as in trunks on the beach, where she'd first met him. She wanted desperately to *possess* him, and that took money, lots of money. This was the reason she had married Francis and why she was going north, so that she could come back alone—a wealthy widow.

Once more her thoughts drifted back to the earlier visit, when the aunts had greeted Clarence Blashaw with such deceptive sweetness, fawning over him to the point where Lila would have been certain they adored him had she not chanced to go out and sit on the porch steps near their window one night when she couldn't sleep. To her surprise she had heard Aunt Affie and Aunt Phillippa talking in angry whispers in their darkened bedroom.

"Just a little nudge," Aunt Affie had said, to which Aunt Phillippa had replied: "Oh, use your head, love. He might just break his fool leg. It's got to be something surefire."

"Like what?"

"Well, if we were to shut the window and turn on the gas heater . . . ."

"We'd have to stuff rags under the door."

"That's easy enough."

"Room still wouldn't be airtight. What if he was to wake up and find the window shut and the gas on and rags under the door? A bit hard to explain, don't you think?"

"Well, sakes alive, love, there's just so many ways you can do it."

"I wonder. Remember how he raved about your grape cordial?"

"Affie—"

"Well, why not? If poison isn't surefire, what is?"

"It's true, he does have a heart condition."

"I'm cold, love. Talking like this sends chills up my spine. Be a dear and shut the window."

The conversation had made sense only if one were to accept the idea of Aunt Affie and Aunt Phillippa as monsters. Lila could not. Shivering in her bed, she had decided it was the sort of gallows humor two sheltered old ladies might indulge in; fantasy talk, childish morbid whimsy, prompted by groundless worry and alarm.

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The following day, watching Clarence down glass after glass of the grape cordial without ill effect, she had dismissed her qualms; that is, until the night before they'd planned to leave, when Clarence had suffered a sudden attack and was dead before they could even reach the doctor.

Aunt Affie had gone into an old-fashioned swoon and Aunt Phillippa had seemed so genuinely rattled it had been impossible, until months later when she'd had time to reflect, to believe there had been a connection between that overheard conversation and Clarence's sudden death. By then she had decided there could be no profit to herself in making a fuss about it. She merely deplored the waste it had all been; it would have been so agreeable to be *really* rich.

Shortly after that she had met Tad, and then several months later Moira had introduced her to Francis Ruggles.

This time it would all be different; different, and yet the same.

When they had arrived at the small house beside the vineyard, she was pleased to find that everything *was* the same: Aunt Phillippa as stout and red-faced, Aunt Affie as shrinking, yellow, and toothless, Sonny Joe as serenely oblivious. Moreover, she was happy to observe that her aunts' manners were as polished and careful as they had been when she'd sprung Clarence Blashaw on them. As soon as Francis had been shown to his room and allowed to rest, she took pains to apprise the old ladies of his delicacy.

"You must be careful to say nothing that might upset him, darlings. He takes offense so easily. I mean, please, no references to the past. You understand?"

Aunt Affie nodded. "Exceptionally ugly people are often unduly sensitive."

Aunt Phillippa agreed. "He *is* exceptionally ugly, as men go. I do believe he's uglier than—oh, you remember, what's-his-name—that other one."

"You mean Clarence."

"I'm so glad you didn't hitch up with him, Lila. Something about his eyes gave me the creeps. I honestly believe fate did you a favor when it struck him down."

Aunt Affie thought so, too. "I just know you'd have been miserable with that ugly lump of a man, Lila dear."

Lila reminded them of the practical aspects of that earlier relationship. "Rich men like that don't come along every day. And I'm not exactly a rosebud, you know."

Aunt Affie wondered if this one

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was as rich as he was ugly; Lila gently reproved her for dwelling on the man's physical appearance. "Francis may be plain, Aunt Affie, but he's also good."

"You mean he's both good *and* rich?" She was plainly skeptical of such a phenomenon.

Lila smiled. How quaint they were. "He's rich in spirit."

"I knew it!" cried Aunt Phillippa. "He's nothing but a lousy fortune hunter."

"Auntie! That's very naughty of you. Francis is a dear, good man and I have the deepest affection for him."

Aunt Phillippa muttered something under her breath that sounded like, "Poppycock."

Aunt Affie was sadly disbelieving. "You mean to tell us, love, that you'd marry a man as ugly as sin if he didn't have any money?"

"Darlings, I'm not a debutante. And one does get lonely."

"You wouldn't be lonely if you stayed where you belonged. I know Sonny Joe would just love to have you stay."

Lila shuddered. "I don't really believe Sonny Joe knows who I am anymore."

"Nonsense. We tell him about you all the time."

Aunt Affie looked toward the tool shed where Sonny Joe sat gazing absently at the ground. "It's a constant worry wondering what'll happen to Sonny Joe after we're gone."

Lila scolded her with a laugh. "You and Aunt Phillippa are healthier than any of us. You'll live forever."

"Nobody lives forever. Remember Mr. Blashaw."

Lila searched Aunt Affie's soft brown eyes for some special meaning. "He had a heart condition, don't forget." She risked a certain nuance, hoping to get a response, but neither lady raised her eyes.

"What about Mr. Ruggles?" asked Aunt Phillippa.

"What about him?"

"Has he any . . . afflictions?"

"Nothing serious. He does have to be careful what he eats—and drinks."

Still there was no reaction. Lila felt suddenly depressed, wondering if her intuition had been wrong, after all.

"You mean he has an ulcer?" inquired Aunt Affie.

"Duodenal or peptic?" Aunt Phillippa took a morbid interest in such things.

"Not an ulcer, no. Gastritis or something."

Aunt Phillippa changed the subject. "Francis Ruggles." She made a face. "I think that's the ugliest

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name I ever heard—the worst."

"Ugly name, ugly man," agreed Aunt Affie.

"You're both incorrigible. I do believe you're jealous."

They both cried out. "I'd sooner be jealous of a fence post," declared the older sister.

Lila was eager to hear what they had to say to each other when they were alone that night in their room, and so she hastened to station herself near the window behind the magnolia bush as soon as she heard them close their door.

"I just don't know," Aunt Affie was heard to remark. "I'm not sure I could go through with it."

"Now you listen to me, silly. You *are* going through with it. You want Sonny Joe to end his days in some verminous madhouse where nobody cared if he lived or died? Well, do you?"

"You know I don't."

"Then show a little backbone."

"But what if someone gets funny ideas?"

"About what? People are dropping like flies all around us, every hour of the day and night."

"But when it happens twice . . ."

"Nobody could possibly believe we are murderers, love. We're not. Murderers are cruel, selfish creatures. If we were cruel and selfish we wouldn't give a hang what happened to Sonny Joe. All we're doing is protecting the one we love, the one who hasn't anyone else to protect him."

Aunt Affie still hedged. "If there were only some other way . . ."

"There isn't. She's determined to marry him. You heard her say so."

"An ugly pauper. Who would ever have thought she was that man crazy?"

"He's got his eye on her money, that's a sure thing. And we're going to see it doesn't happen." Her tone became brisk, as if calling a meeting to order after the first casual preliminaries. "Now then. Ways and means."

"Oh, dear. It's all so hateful to think about."

"Still, we must. We went through all this before. Accidents are awkward. Results are so unpredictable. Better to stick to the same method."

"But, love, isn't that inviting suspicion?"

"Have to chance it. After all, it's swift, efficient, and nobody gets hurt."

Aunt Affie tittered. "Wouldn't exactly say that, love."

"You know what I mean. There's no pain."

"And no blood. I always dread

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the thought of seeing any blood."

"Then it's decided. That leaves just the question of when."

"Oh, do let's get it over with at once. You know what my nerves were like the last time, waiting till the very last day."

"Fine by me. Tomorrow, at dinner, you think?"

"Oh, lovely. It's supposed to be nice tomorrow and we did promise them a picnic."

"Then it's all settled. Good night, love. I'm going to say my prayers now and go to sleep."

Lila waited there in the shadows until she heard them both snoring, then she stole away from the house to where the late summer moon hung over the dark vineyard. The leaves glistened wetly as if drenched in the moon's tears, but there was no sadness, no despondency, no uncertainty in Lila's upturned face. A sense of completion filled her with a tranquillity that matched the night's.

She thought of her aunts as figures out of Shakespeare or Greek mythology, instruments of Fate. She would reward them amply, would settle upon them all they would have expected Sonny Joe one day to inherit. She could well afford to be that generous; it would amount to a pittance compared with the wealth she would get from Francis' estate. Wealth and her very own golden Apollo!

From the moment he awakened, Francis was the beneficiary of a sweetness he had never known before. Lila brought him his breakfast in bed, murmured endearments while he dressed, refused to release his hand as they walked among the sparkling rows of grapes.

"You gave me the wrong impression of your aunts," he said to her. "They couldn't have been lovelier to me."

"I'm glad you like them, darling."

"I really see no reason why we shouldn't tell them the truth."

She gave him a quick look. "Oh, let's not spoil it. You don't know them as I do. It might have the wrong effect. I'll write to them when we're home."

The rest of the day, with its picnic in the sun, went as pleasantly as the morning. At dinner, Francis raised his brimming glass of grape cordial and toasted his wife's aunts.

They lifted their glasses, even Sonny Joe, although he obviously didn't know what it was all about.

Francis retired to his room after dinner to smoke his postprandial cigar far enough away not to offend the ladies. Lila wanted to help with the dishes but her aunts shooed her away, so she went out-

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side and sat on the swing, not actually swinging but sitting rigid and motionless, alert for the first agonized cry that would reach her from Francis' room.

Thus she was alone and there was no one to see the first look of pain on her face, nor to hear the gasp of surprise that quickly followed it. No one actually saw her pitch forward and fall to the porch floor. Later, Aunt Phillippa would tell everyone it was the sound of the swing banging against the kitchen wall that made her go to the door and look out, but it was too late. Lila was already dead.

"She'd always had a weak heart," Aunt Affie confided to the stricken Francis, after the doctor and coroner had performed their offices and the undertaker had removed the corpse.

"She never told me."

"She was a great one for keeping things from people. And so brave, poor dear."

Aunt Phillippa rested a consoling hand on Francis' bowed shoulder, surprised at how grief could ennoble a man's features: he didn't look nearly so ugly as he had earlier. Or was it that he was no longer a threat? None of them would ever be a threat again. Easier in the long run to eliminate poor Lila than an endless string of suitors. Now the inheritance was assured.

"I know it's cold comfort, dear Mr. Ruggles, but in a way it's better it happened now than afterward."

"Afterward?"

"After you were married, I mean."

He gave her a long, sorrowing look, then shook his head as if he still couldn't believe it. "But we *were* married."

The sisters exchanged horrified glances. "Married?"

Francis nodded. "She didn't want to tell you. She was afraid you might feel slighted. She meant to write and tell you after we got home."

Aunt Affie's jaw seemed to have come unhinged. Aunt Phillippa made a couple of attempts at speech but could manage only a labored cough.

Francis rubbed his eyes. "She wanted us all to like each other. That's the way she was, always thinking of others, right up to the very end."

Whereupon they all sat down and wept.

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Something should be said about days like this, but not in print.

There is this alley behind the bank, not too wide and not used a whole lot. Twice a week an armored car comes down the alley and parks in a little wide space behind the bank. Then two guys get out and take sacks into the bank and bring sacks out of the bank to stick in the car. Mostly one guy does the work while the other slob stands guard. They take turns doing this.

Me and Eddie Pearson watch them doing this act for two

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weeks. We know their operation backwards. They bring out the most cash sacks on Fridays as a rule. So Friday is our day . . . the next one.

The weather plays right into our hands, too. It's hot.

The guards have been on this milk run for a long time and nothing's happened to them, so they get a little loose with the rules. When it's hot they don't lock up the iron car like they should. It must be hotter'n a nickel tamale in that boiler; you can see the heat waves dancing on the top of it, and every day, through my spyglass, I watch them sweating. They must've had a lazy air-conditioner, or none at all.

We have got a very simple plan, Eddie and me. We will hit the armored car on Friday and disappear with the dough. I've got it all worked out on paper and it should go like greased snake oil. I'm the brains of the thing and Eddie is the driver.

Eddie is a slick little guy, quick and active as a bird. He can swipe a car out from under the citizen which is driving it, almost. I tell him to go out and glom onto a family-type sedan, something that looks like every other car on the road, and not too new. We will use it to get out of town.

So he does. We park it on the street in a nice, respectable neighborhood where there's lots of quiet houses and nice respectable people. We do this on Thursday.

On Friday morning we liberate a big green truck which is sitting in the shade in an industrial section, and Eddie drives it to within a block of the bank. He is a little squirt, like I said, and the truck is so big I have to help him turn the steering wheel to go around corners. It is like a tank, but that is just what we want—something big as a house and heavy as a battleship.

We use it to bottle up the armored car in the alley. As soon as the iron car stops and the guys start to load it, Eddie backs the big green monster into the alley until it bumps the armored car. The two guards yell at us and we get down with our rodneys and it is all over. They are caught with round mouths and eyes to match, and we shove them into the iron boat and lock the doors—as soon as we load the loot into the green dragon.

It is terrible the things which those two guys say to us. They don't appear to like it at all, but with the doors shut and locked we can't hear much.

The whole thing is a cinch—like I knew it would be. When I plan

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a caper it is planned to a T. This is what I tell Eddie all the way to the getaway car we'd stashed in the suburbs.

Well, almost all the way. Eddie turns on the truck radio and we hear the first report of the heist. The announcer says two guys in a big green truck have robbed the First National. This shakes up Eddie so much he runs a stop signal. A dozen cars honk at us, a taxi driver shouts something coarse about Eddie's mother, and a fat lady crossing-guard runs down the street after us, waving her sign.

I tell Eddie he shouldn't have picked a *green* truck. He shouts back at me and crumples a fender of a parked car. So I stop yelling that he is a jerk about the color, and tell him to step on it. He screams back that the truck won't go as fast as Boulder Dam and for me to stop jumping around in the seat.

It is suddenly a bad scene and not the way I planned it. It is all Eddie's fault. He should have picked a black truck.

The radio is crackling too, with lousy news. The cops won't stop broadcasting about the bank being robbed, mentioning the green truck and telling the world our descriptions. I tell Eddie to get onto the back streets. We are both sweating blood. I never planned on nothing like this.

We almost get lost on the twisty back streets and it seems like an hour before we finally reach the getaway car. It is so quiet in the neighborhood that you can hear flies buzzing against windows a block away. There are only a couple other cars parked on the street and the green monster stands out like a topless waitress in church. It makes me nervous to see the curtains fluttering at windows as senior citizens give us the double 0. I am thinking that it is only a matter of time before one of them little old ladies switches on the radio and hears the awful truth.

By then, I think, we'll be long gone. That's what I *think*. I am thinking that just a minute or so before Eddie discovers that the battery on the family-type boiler has gone dead.

He shouts the bad news at me and I scream back at him to get in the lousy truck and push the car till it starts! He says the truck won't go fast enough and for us to switch the batteries—but the truck battery is too big.

I tell Eddie to go steal one of the parked cars on the street but he is afraid to. He yells at me to get in the truck and we roar away—at twenty miles an hour. That dumb Eddie thinks we can

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make a getaway in the green elephant! How dumb can you get?

The radio is still on, bombarding us with terrible news, and then we are suddenly stunned. Eddie wrenches the wheel in his startled surprise and runs over the end of a Volkswagen. I see the guy inside struggling to get out, but the doors are bent. I see this, but it doesn't really percolate, because the announcer has just said that the amount of the loot taken from the First National is eighty thousand green ones.

Eddie is gasping; his weak mouth is open and he is staring into space. We never expected no windfall like that! I have to grab the wheel of the truck because he is weaving down the center line and a couple cars have already dodged up on the sidewalk to avoid the juggernaut.

We have got more loot than we ever expected to get in our lives, in a prominent green monster for which every cop in town is looking.

The radio is so loud that I can't think, so I turn it off. My blood is racing anyway from listening to the announcer saying the cops are going to run down that green truck any second. Eddie shouts at me that we have *got* to steal a car and get rid of this dumb truck. For once I agree with him. We have got to take the chance. I hate to stop in broad daylight while Eddie rewires a car—the guy who owns it might be watching and loading his shotgun—but I don't see any other way out.

Then I do.

We pass a sign stuck in a lawn and I scream at Eddie to stop and back up. The sign says, CAR FOR SALE.

Even Eddie, dumb as he is, can see that we would be better off in our own car. I tell him to park the monster and get ready to transfer the loot bags, and I rush up onto the porch of the house.

When I ring the bell an old doll comes to the door and I start moaning to myself. There must be a hunnerd, a thousand signs out, CAR FOR SALE, and I have to stumble over this half-deaf cookie. She is frail as a potato chip, wears faded lace and carries a cane. She is a little wispy thing and she peers at me over her bifocals when I tell her I want to buy her heap.

She invites me in. It takes her a year to unfasten all the locks and chains and hooks on the screen, with me clenching my fists and wanting to rip the door down; but she finally makes it. Then she wants to pour me some tea and discuss it. I almost yell at her to skip the refreshments. "Where's the car, lady?"

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In a brittle voice she tells me it's only four years old and that she has kept good care of it.

I say, "I'll take it. Here's some dough." I push a wad at her. I don't care how much. "Where's the car?"

She says, "Oh my—" hand to mouth. Then she wants to get me the service station reports, while she is telling me how good the tires are. She says they're almost new.

I say, "That's good, lady. Where is it?"

She paws through a desk looking for the ownership certificate. "I had it here just yesterday . . ."

"Where's the car?" I yell at her.

She says it is in the garage out back and I take off. She calls after me that the keys are in it and that I didn't get the certificate. I run back and grab it, hearing Eddie honking the horn of the truck. He is getting as jumpy as me.

I dash out the back door hearing her saying something else. She is tottering after me, jingling some keys. I discover they are for the garage. It is locked, of course. I have to run back and get them.

I can see Eddie in the driveway, and I can hear the radio in the truck which he has turned on again. Eddie is running back and forth and jumping up and down. He shouts that he can hear sirens, that some fink has spotted the truck.

I can hear the sirens, too . . . in the distance.

Eddie is still screaming at me while I unlock the garage door. I yell at him that I bought the car, and he runs back to the truck to get out some of the loot.

The sirens are getting closer.

As I swing the doors open, the old doll squeaks at me, "There is plenty of gas in the tank, young man." I don't even thank her.

The sirens are like doom, coming closer—we might just make it. Daylight floods into the garage. I stop and gawk at the car. It is just like she said, four years old and in great shape.

So are the tires. They are neatly lined up along one wall.

The car is up on blocks.

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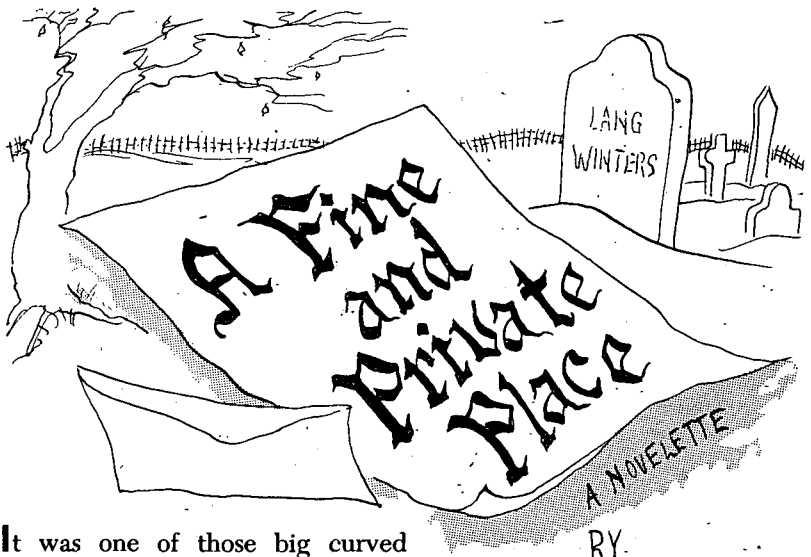
The words intimating a tragedy are not frightening per se, but only in their provocative portent.



A Fine and Private Place

A NOVELETTE

BY

VIRGINIA LONG

It was one of those big curved swords—scimitars, I think they're called—like in Arabian Nights, and it was suspended by a chain from an iron eyebolt set in the stone ceiling. I couldn't see any mechanism that kept it moving, but it was swinging in a wide, regular arc. On each pass it came a little closer to my bare belly. I could feel the rope cutting in where it passed across my stomach, looped my wrists and passed on under the scarred wooden block on which I was spread-eagled. With each deadly swoop, from somewhere to my left I could hear the mind-shattering clangor of a bell which hushed and held for a moment as the sword hesitated at its apogee, then jangled again louder and louder as the sword came back. I gauged the distance the blade lowered with each pass, and when I knew the next swing would gut me like a fish, I tensed my mus-

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cles and threw myself to one side, snapping the heavy rope as if it were string. As I rolled off the side of the block a bare fraction of an inch ahead of the murderous blade, my left elbow struck with numbing force against—the bedside table.

It took me a while to orient myself, and I sat there on the side of the bed shuddering, not so much from the lingering horror of the dream as from the writer's horror of unconscious plagiarism. The sword was gone, but the bell still kept up its hellish tempo.

Finally I reached for the telephone, with the sneaking suspicion that it was old Edgar himself, telling me that he was suing me for everything I had; or half of what I had—after all, I didn't steal his Pit.

It wasn't Edgar's voice, but a soft, hesitant half-drawl I hadn't heard often for six years and not at all for two, and the heart that hadn't so much as stirred in me those past two years slowly turned over and started pounding like a trip-hammer.

"Max?"

I held my breath for a minute and let the room settle back down around me, and then I said, "Julia." It was all I could manage, and it wasn't a question.

"Max—" She said it urgently and stopped. "Max, does the name Marvell mean anything to you?"

I hadn't seen her for two years, but it would have taken longer than that to turn her into the moronic sort of woman who calls at ungodly hours to ask stupid questions. If she called me at this time of night—I looked at the clock and saw that it was eleven, then at the window and saw that it was light. All right, so it wasn't an ungodly hour except to a writer who had gotten back in town late the night before and then stayed up for the rest of it to finish a story. Anyway, if she'd called me at all it was for a good reason and, as far as I was concerned, she didn't even need that.

Marvell, I thought, and my mind took over for a while to give my heart, which was still doing calisthenics, a rest. "Well, there's a lawyer in town, Louis Marvell; old guy, been practicing for forty or fifty years. Fellow named Buck Marvell runs a service station across from the auditorium. There's a Little Marvell Manufacturing Company out on South Loop."

No reaction from the other end of the line, so I dug deeper. "There was a girl in college, Marvell Hudson. Big girl—"

"No. No, it has to be a Marvell that means something to *me!* Oh,

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Max, I'm being so rude. How are you? I've read dozens of your stories and I'm so proud of you!"

"Thanks," I said, but she hadn't broken a two-year silence to tell me she liked my stories, which aren't all that good anyway. They keep the refrigerator full of beer and cheese while I write my novel.

Julia's voice was unsteady, and I was sure it wasn't for the same reason my own was. I asked, "Is something wrong? What's this Marvell business?"

There was a long silence and I heard her draw a deep breath. "I'm frightened, Max. I got this letter—not really a letter—could I see you?"

"Do you still live in the same place? I can be there in half an hour."

"Oh, please! Yes, the same apartment. It will be so good to see you again."

After I hung up, I sat there on the side of the bed remembering the last time I'd seen her; thin and pale, her eyes dark and shiny with tears she hadn't been able to let go, telling me she didn't want to see me for a while. There were a lot of pieces she had to try to put back together, and it was something she had to do alone. She'd known for a long time that I loved her and I knew she knew, but it was something we'd never talked about. There are things you just don't say to your best friend's wife, or even to his widow—at least until after a decent interval.

A week isn't a decent interval, and it was only a week after Lang Winters died that she'd told me in effect, "Don't call me, I'll call you." I'd already done all I could to help. It was me she called when a highway patrolman broke the news to her that Lang's car had gone off the road into a gully, rolled over maybe half a dozen times and then burned to a twisted black mess. Part of the twisted black mess was Lang, and I went with her to the morgue to identify the monogrammed ring, money clip and the batch of keys that were about all there was left to identify, but there was never any doubt in anyone's mind that it was Lang. His favorite bar on the edge of town provided plenty of witnesses who'd seen him stagger out alone not long before closing time, thirty minutes before the accident, and get in his car. They weren't surprised to hear about the wreck, but only that he'd been able to drive twelve miles before he had it.

Lang was sort of an oddball in college, and I suppose maybe I was too. We lived in the same dorm, and we had hit it off right

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from the start. We were both taking a lot of literature and creative writing courses, but his interest was poetry and I knew I was destined to write the Great American Novel. He showed me quite a bit of his stuff, but it was too undisciplined for my taste.

I remember the night he decided on a pen name. "Lang Winters," he said, giving it the German pronunciation. "Kurt Sommers. What could be more logical for the other half of me, my alter ego? Long winters and short summers make a nice rounded whole. What do you think?"

I assured him it was an inspired choice.

During our junior year he started sending off poems, signed "Kurt Sommers," to different magazines, but I don't think he ever had one accepted. I always knew when he got a rejection slip, though. He'd come to my room, lounge around for a few minutes playing at being casual, and then say suddenly, "What we need is a *beer!*"

During our last year, Julia was in one English Lit class with us. We started going around together, the three of us at first and then it gradually narrowed down to the two of them. I didn't hear any more invitations for beer and, as far as I know, he never wrote another poem. At midterm, he changed his schedule to get as many journalism classes as he could, and that would have told me, even if he hadn't, that he was dead serious about Julia. Rejection slips don't go far toward supporting a wife.

They were married right after graduation, as soon as he'd landed a job writing copy for an advertising agency. He was good at it, too, and within a couple of years he made account executive.

At first, they had me over to dinner often. I enjoyed the evenings, the good food and the good conversation. Trouble was, I gradually found myself looking forward to those evenings too much, and not for the food or conversation, so I started finding excuses to turn down the dinner invitations, even to the point of taking out girls I didn't care anything about, just to be busy when Lang called. Through friends, I heard that things weren't going well with them. Lang started drinking heavily and lost his advertising job, but he took a couple of big clients along with him and set up an agency of his own. It was a shoestring affair, but he was able to keep his head above water because Julia ran the office and saw that he was sober enough at the

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right times to keep the small stable of clients happy.

I still went by for an occasional Sunday dinner, but it was pizza now instead of steak, beer instead of wine. I couldn't bring myself to a complete break, but I made a deal with myself that I'd look at Julia only when she spoke to me, and I'd confine most of my conversation to Lang. It got harder and harder to do, though. There was a bitterness building up in him, along with his increasing reliance on the bottle. Most of his hostility was aimed dead at Julia, who would sit there with a bruised, helpless look in her eyes after one of his tirades. I was getting pretty close to hating him.

The last time I saw him, just a couple of weeks before the accident, was at the end of a particularly unpleasant Sunday evening. I helped Julia get him to bed after he'd taken a drunken swing at me for no good reason, and then passed out. As I was leaving, I brushed aside her apologies and took both her hands in mine.

"Julia, if you ever need me for anything, call me. But whatever friendship we had—" I glanced toward the bedroom where Lang was snoring heavily, "I think it got drowned somewhere along the way."

She nodded, clasping my hands like a frightened child, and when I bent to touch my lips to her forehead, it was like kissing a little girl; but neither of us was a child, and I knew that was why I had to leave and not come back.

I did come back, of course, but it was only when I got a frantic call in the night two weeks later . . .

Now I pulled my thoughts back to the present. I put some coffee on to perk while I shaved and showered, and then burned my mouth trying to drink it and dress at the same time.

It was exactly thirty-five minutes after I'd hung up the telephone that I wheeled my elderly car into a parking spot at her apartment house, and I was cursing myself for being five minutes late; but when she opened the door it didn't matter. Even two years didn't matter. There she was, tall and slim and completely lovely, the short blonde hair done a little differently, but those incredible violet eyes just the same.

We stumbled through our greetings. I tried to tell her I was glad to see her without telling just *how* glad, and she was trying to observe the amenities but obviously wanting to get to the point. I apologized for being so slow to answer the phone, explaining that I'd been out of town until late

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and then up the rest of the night writing, and then she apologized for waking me.

Finally, she walked over to a desk where she took a folded sheet of paper from an envelope, turned and held it out to me.

I took it and glanced at it. Three words, scrawled in a heavy masculine hand, jumped out at me. "Marvell was wrong!" That's all it said.

I met her eyes and saw there a sort of waiting terror. There was nothing so frightening about the words, but obviously it wasn't the words themselves that had her on the edge of hysterics.

"You still can't make any sense of it?"

"No, I have no idea what it could mean. But, Max, don't you notice anything about it?"

I studied the paper again and shook my head. She started to speak, then took a cigarette from a box and lit it with trembling hands. With her back to me, her voice was almost inaudible and completely without inflection.

"It's Lang's handwriting."

I stared at the back of her head, then down at the paper and wondered if she'd grieved herself into some kind of lunacy.

"Julia, it can't be. It's impossible, you *know* that!" But I didn't sound convincing, even to myself. I was comparing the harsh scrawl with what I remembered, and I knew she was right. The "ng" on the end of "wrong" was the same flattened waves with a mere hook at the end that I'd seen a hundred times when Lang signed his name.

She turned to see how I was taking it, and nodded slightly in answer to the stunned look on my face. "A voice from the grave," she said, still in the same lifeless tone.

When she said that, something started buzzing in the back of my mind, something about Lang and Julia and me and graves and Marvell. Finally I had it.

"Julia, remember English-Lit in college, the class we three were in?" I saw her hesitate, thinking, and then nod. "We studied Seventeenth Century metaphysical poets; John Donne, George Herbert. Andrew Marvell."

Her eyes widened and some life came back into her voice. "Of course! Marvell was one of Lang's favorites. He was always quoting from something—" She rose and went to a bookshelf near the fireplace and ran her hand slowly along a row of books. She found what she wanted and brought it to me. We didn't need to see the "Lang Winters" written on the flyleaf, but I held the paper in my hand up beside the name. No

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doubt about it; the very same hand.

She leafed through the book, found Marvell and we started running through poems rapidly. She reached to turn another page, then suddenly slapped her hand down.

"Here. This is the one he quoted so often. *To His Coy Mistress.*"

It was familiar enough to both of us, now that it was right in front of us, but we read it slowly.

"Had we but world enough and time,

This coyness, lady, were no crime . . ."

It's a clever piece of work, but we were as puzzled as ever until we got a little past the middle of it, and then we both saw it at the same time.

"The grave's a fine and private place,

But none I think do there embrace."

She closed the book and put it on the coffee table, shoving it away from her as if it were a live and threatening thing.

For a few minutes it had been a challenge, a strange game of Twenty Questions, but now it hit her. She dropped her face into her hands. "Oh, Max, who was that man in the car? *Who did we bury?*"

I was as shocked as she was, but I tried to discipline my thoughts. I went over to the desk where she'd left the envelope. Her name and address were printed, a little shakily, and the ink was blurred and streaked as if it had gotten wet. No return address, and the postmark was blurred as well. I brought it over to the light to try to make it out. At first I couldn't read it—I was pretty shaky myself—but gradually the letters steadied enough that I could see "Overton." I couldn't make out the state, but the zip code was clear. I knew where it was.

Julia still sat in an attitude of despair. I reached for her hand but it was cold and still in mine. I could guess at some of the things that were going through her mind; at best, that Lang had deserted her and let her think he was dead; at worst, that he'd killed a man and was in hiding. While I was aching for her, a plan was shaping in my mind. I knew I had to do something. I had a lot at stake in this too.

"Julia." She looked at me dully from a long distance away, then blinked and came back. "I'm between stories and there's nothing I have to do for a few days. I'll go to this Overton and have a look around. Okay?"

She shook off the numbness

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with an effort, and with some of her old efficiency found an atlas of road maps. She checked for Overtons and found several, but only one in the right zip code zone, about three hundred miles away. She wanted to go with me, but I convinced her that I should do the preliminary scouting, then call her if I had any good leads.

A couple of hours later, after packing a small bag and stopping for a hamburger I couldn't eat, I was on my way. My car is old, but I keep it in good condition and I made the drive in an easy five hours, including a couple of gas stops.

Overton wasn't much of a city. The city limits sign said "Pop. 35,427" but I don't think it had been changed with the last census or two. I checked into a motel, cleaned up a little and went out to look around.

I found a bar in a decent neighborhood and ordered a Scotch on the rocks. As I sipped, I saw a telephone at the end of the bar and asked the bartender if a directory went with it. He pulled a stained, dog-eared book from under the counter and slid it along the bar to me.

I opened it to the W's and automatically looked for Winters. There wasn't much chance that he'd be using his own name, but in fact as well as in fiction, most people who change their names stick with the same initials. I had to start somewhere. I found a Lloyd Winton and a Lawrence Walters. There was an L. Robert Winters, but it was followed by an M.D., which ruled him out.

My first dime bought me a recording that said the number I had dialed was no longer in service, and when I fed back the dime to try Lawrence Walters, a woman answered. I asked for Mr. Walters, she said, "Just a minute," and then a creaky voice that must have been eighty years old came on. I apologized for getting the wrong Mr. Walters and hung up. I sipped my Scotch thoughtfully, without any clear idea of what to do next. I was absently flipping the pages of the phone book when one of those alphabetical page headers caught my eye. I turned back to it quickly, and a surge of electricity went through me. "Short-Summers".

It was too much of a coincidence to ignore. Kurt Sommers—Lang would very likely have used his old pen name. I ran my finger down the listings and felt only a slight letdown that there wasn't a Kurt Sommers. I checked quickly for Curt Summers, just to make sure, and then dialed Directory Assistance to see if there were a

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new listing for either name. There wasn't, but I still felt I was onto something halfway solid—a ghost still, but at least one with a name. Lang Winters was dead, and it made a lot more sense to be hunting Kurt Sommers.

After a fine steak I headed back to my motel. It was too late to do anything else, and morning would come soon enough. I read for a while and then slept uneasily, with Julia's face slipping in and out of my dreams with tantalizing regularity.

The next morning I stalled around over breakfast, trying to think how one of my fictional private detectives would handle an investigation like this. Not through the police, that was sure. I was hoping it would never turn into a police matter, and right now it was strictly a personal affair.

A man can change his name, his living habits, his whole identity, but he can't change his basic nature easily. Lang had always been an insatiable reader, and I knew that wherever he lived, as long as he lived, he'd have a rut worn in the steps of the public library. I got directions to the library, and was waiting when the door opened at nine. There was a stern-faced, frizzy-haired woman at the desk. I arranged my face into a shy, stranger-in-town expression and went up to her.

I told her I was just passing through town and trying to look up an old Army buddy. He wasn't in the telephone book, but I just knew if he were around, he'd have a library card. It worked, and while she was explaining the rules that made it impossible for her to help me, she was flipping through a card index to "Sommers, Kurt." I saw "1323 W. 16th, 2B" and fitted it into a mental slot while I assured her I understood, and thanks anyway.

I had a name and address now, and it almost scared me that things were moving so fast. I considered calling Julia but decided against it. Maybe it was all coincidence, and this Kurt Sommers would turn out to be a fat, middle-aged butcher with a wife and six kids. I'd better narrow things down more before I called.

I found a city map in a drugstore and drove out to West Sixteenth Street. It was a run-down neighborhood, with a scattering of small businesses mixed in with old, two-storied houses and apartment buildings. I located 1323 in the middle of a depressing block, and parked across from it.

I watched the dingy entrance while I smoked a cigarette, reluctant to go in. It was sad to think

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of an old friend living in such a place, and even sadder to think of the reasons he would have for living there.

When I did get up the courage to go into the building, I rang the bell of apartment 2B a couple of times, and then was turning to leave when I heard movement inside. It was a soft scuffling, as of a man stepping back from the door, trying not to make any noise. I held my breath and listened. I thought I could hear breathing on the other side of the door, but it could have been my imagination. Then there was a faint mewing kind of sound, and I almost laughed out loud at myself. Someone's cat. But still—

Obviously the cat or anyone else there didn't intend to come to the door, so I went back to my car. As I started it, I glanced across and it wasn't my imagination that twitched a curtain back into place. It could have been a cat jumping onto the windowsill, but I didn't think so.

I felt that I was at some sort of dead end, so I did just what I do when inspiration deserts me in the middle of a story. I put the whole mess out of my mind, and turned to other things that needed to be done. I got some lunch, had a haircut and shine, and checked over the paperbacks and magazines at a bookstore. I was pleased to see three mystery mags that carried stories of mine. It comforted me to think of how competently I'd solved the problems in those. On that upbeat note I went back to the motel and slept for a while. When I woke up, it was getting dark and I didn't have any better plan than to go back to 1323 West Sixteenth and try again.

This time, as soon as I rang the doorbell I heard heels clicking across a bare floor, and the door opened about six inches, showing me a young, big-eyed girl with dark hair tied back in a ponytail. She appeared to be about seventeen from her hair and her clothes, but her eyes gave her another five years or so.

"Mrs. Sommers?" I hadn't expected a girl at all, but that seemed like a natural assumption.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Sommers. What do you want?" The question wasn't abrupt or unfriendly, just businesslike.

"I'm looking for an old friend from college days, Kurt Sommers. Someone said he lived here." I watched her closely, not knowing quite what to expect. What I got was tears.

She didn't burst into tears. She just stood there while two huge tears slowly made their way down

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her cheeks. It was odd that neither her expression nor her voice changed.

"He's not here."

"When will he be back? I'd really like to see old Kurt again."

"When did you say you knew him?" She still held the door open a scant six inches.

"We lived in the same dormitory at college. Does he still write poetry?"

Her expression changed, and she slowly stepped back as she opened the door all the way. I could see the room now—shabby, with cheap furnishings and a sink and stove at one side. It looked clean and neat though, as did the girl. I walked in and she waved me to the only big chair in the room. She drew up a straight kitchen chair and sat down facing me.

"What is your name?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Maxwell Mannington. I don't know if he's ever mentioned me."

"Mannington," she repeated, her solemn eyes never leaving my face. "He's never talked much about the past. What did you want to see him about?"

"Just wanted to say hello to an old buddy," I said heartily. "I heard he lived in Overton and thought I'd look him up while I was in town."

"When did you last see him?" Fine investigator I was. She was asking all the questions.

"Just about two years ago, I think it was." I knew it was a mistake as soon as I said it. She stood up suddenly and her face was closed and cold.

"He's not here, and I'm very busy."

I stood too, and as I did, I saw a door at the side of the room move imperceptibly. I heard a faint crinkling sound which I couldn't quite place, and I knew that someone stood just inside the door, watching through the hairline crack. I've heard of people's scalps crawling, but this was the first time my own did.

I realized that she hadn't told me a damned thing really. Maybe there was a Kurt Sommers in the next room and he wasn't Lang at all. One of my heroes would have jerked the door open and hauled the watcher out into sight, but I wasn't about to do it.

She had gone to the door and was holding it open. I had no choice but to leave, but I made one last stab. "When Kurt gets home, would you tell him I'm at the Starlite Motel on North Central?" She stared at me stonily, and I left.

I stood by my car uncertainly for a few minutes before I reached for my keys to unlock it.

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It was good and dark now, and the dim light from the street corners didn't reach the middle of the block. I had the key out and was making a blind try at finding the keyhole when I sensed, rather than heard, movement behind me, and at the same time I got a whiff of something sweet and pungent. Before I could turn,

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something slammed into the back of my head and the last thought I had before I hit the pavement was that it was too trite; people don't *really* see stars. But I did—novas, supernovas, the works.

I don't know how much later it was when I woke up. I was flat on my face on the street, luckily right next to my car so I hadn't been run over by any passing vehicles. Maybe there hadn't even been time for any to pass. My head hurt like hell and I was nauseated. I pulled myself up and found that I still had the car keys clenched in my fist. I managed to get the car door open and collapsed into the seat. I cranked the window down and drew some deep breaths of the night air, and the nausea started to recede a little. I felt the back of my head. No cuts or scrapes, just one big circle of pain.

I turned on the dome light and checked my wallet. Nothing was missing, but I didn't expect there would be. If it had been a run-of-the-mill mugging, I could have hollered cop, but I sure didn't want them in on this case. One thing was certain: someone didn't want me to find Kurt Sommers, and that slip of a girl couldn't have packed the wallop that put me down.

As soon as I felt steady enough, I drove to the motel, took a long, hot shower, then propped myself up on the bed, set a bottle of Scotch and a glass within easy reach, and pulled the phone to me. It was time to let Julia know what was going on.

She listened quietly while I filled her in. I didn't editorialize, I just reported. I felt a little foolish telling her about getting clobbered, but I gave her the whole story. When I was through, she was silent for a moment and then said with soft certainty, "Then Lang *is* there!"

I told her I was inclined to agree but wondered why she was so sure.

"You said it was after you asked if he still wrote poetry that she let you in. So her Kurt Sommers is a poet. And it was when you said two years that she turned you out. Isn't it asking too much of coincidence for there to be two Kurt Sommers who write poetry and had some shady event in their lives two years ago?"

"Seems like it, doesn't it?" I said, and started to tell her I'd call her again the next day. She had other ideas.

"I've already checked the airlines, and I can get a commuter flight out at 7:40 tomorrow morning, arriving in Overton at 9:30. Can you meet me?"

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"Of course I can, but I don't know if you should be here. If someone's going to play rough . . ." I touched the back of my neck gingerly.

"I'm not afraid of anything as much as I am of staying here, not knowing. See you in the morning?"

I still didn't like the idea of her walking into what was bound to be unpleasant, however it came out, but I did like the idea of seeing her again. I told her I'd be waiting at the airport.

I'd just hung up, hadn't even taken my hand off the receiver, when the phone rang. I picked it up again, and it was a woman's voice.

"Mr. Mannington, this is Elsie Sommers."

I thought about it and decided the girl naturally would have a first name, even if her last name wasn't what you'd call real legitimate. I was pretty abrupt, which I thought was excusable under the circumstances. "Yes?"

"You really are an old friend of Kurt's, aren't you?"

"I told you I was."

"I wasn't sure. I thought you might be looking for him for—for some other reason."

"What other reason?" I was curious about how much the girl knew.

"No reason, I guess. But I was just looking through some of his papers and found an envelope addressed to you."

That really threw me. It was a little too pat. I come around asking questions, and she conveniently finds a letter that might answer them for me.

She went on, "If you could come by again, I'll give it to you. I really am sorry I acted like I did."

I looked at my watch. "It's late now, and I have to meet someone in the morning. But afterward—would you be home at about eleven?"

"I'll be here, Mr. Mannington." She hung up without saying goodbye, and it was a long time before I could get to sleep.

This was a puzzler, might even be a trap of some kind, and if it were, I'd have to walk right into it. Julia had to have some answers, and I had to find them for her. At least this time I'd be awfully careful about who got behind me. I knew Julia would insist on going with me, and she was the one person in the world to whom I couldn't say no.

I was at the airport early. When the small plane eased down onto the runway, she was the only passenger to get off at this stop, and I started for her. When she

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saw me, she broke into a half-run and from the look in her eyes I thought for the first time that whatever legal technicalities our search might stir up, its object no longer had any emotional claim on her. We both stopped a step short, a little uncertain what to do. Then I put an arm across her shoulders and she touched her cheek briefly to mine. I led her to the car and we drove the few miles into Overton.

As we went, I filled her in on the girl's phone call about the letter and, as I'd anticipated, she wanted to go with me to get it. We stopped by the motel, got a room for Julia, and I waited while she freshened up. Then we headed for Sixteenth Street.

It was half an hour earlier than I'd told Mrs. Sommers when we pulled to the curb across the street and down a couple of doors. I started to get out, glanced across the street and sank back into my seat, sliding down as far as I could and motioning to Julia to get down.

Elsie Sommers was coming down the steps of the apartment building, carrying a man's dark suit across her arm. There was a green-and-black-striped tie looped around the neck of the hanger, and in her other hand she carried a paper bag. She walked quickly off down the street in the opposite direction from the one the car was pointed. Just as she approached the corner, a large moving van blocked our view so that we couldn't see which way she turned.

I started the car and drove around the block to the corner where we'd lost sight of her. I kept circling blocks for ten minutes or so, but we didn't get another glimpse of her. At last we gave up and went back to park in front of her apartment. While we waited for her to come back, Julia speculated: Lang had moved to some other place nearby, and Elsie was keeping him supplied with fresh clothes while she got rid of me with a trumped-up letter of some kind.

At five to eleven, we saw her come back, empty-handed. We waited a few minutes and then went in. She opened the door immediately and seemed only moderately surprised that I wasn't alone.

"This is Julia Winters. Mrs. Sommers." I made the brief introduction without attempting an explanation, but I put my arm around Julia to give the impression that I'd just brought my girlfriend along. Things were tangled enough without bringing in more complications. I sure wasn't going

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to say, "Mrs. Sommers, this is your husband's wife."

Julia, very calm and polite, said, "How do you do?" like she really wanted to know, and under the cover of her poise she was studying the girl and the room carefully. My old anger at Lang ballooned. It was a painful position for her.

Elsie Sommers didn't ask us to sit down, but went straight to the kitchen counter and picked up a thick envelope. She handed it to me without a word. I knew she expected me to take it and leave, but I was listening, and it came—a very slight movement from the other room that I'd have missed if I hadn't been tuned for it. I saw the tilt of Julia's head, and knew she'd heard it too. It didn't fit with the theory Julia had worked out earlier, but I decided to go for broke, since it wasn't likely we'd be invited back again.

Resisting an insane impulse to call, "Lazarus, come forth!" I fixed Elsie with what I hoped was a steely-eyed look and gestured toward the bedroom door. "Tell him to come out here!"

She had half turned from us, but she spun back to face me and she looked startled and puzzled but not frightened, as far as I could tell. Then a curious look of resignation took over, and she walked to the door, opened it a little and said something very quietly. She came back to stand near us and we waited, all three of us, with our eyes riveted on the door.

He walked out slowly and reluctantly, looking at the floor, across the room, everywhere but at us. He was tall, heavy and soft-looking through the middle. As we stared, he fumbled in his pocket, took out a peppermint drop, unwrapped it with the utmost concentration and popped it into his mouth.

That brought me out of my paralysis. I'd heard the crinkling of a wrapper like that before, and the sharp sweet aroma of peppermint. That's what I had smelled just before I caught it in the back of the head. I took three steps, grabbed a handful of shirt just under his chin and pulled him up onto his toes.

"I ought to break *your* head!" I yelled.

Julia was pulling ineffectually at my arm and Elsie was pounding on my back, screaming something, when I suddenly realized that something was wrong. The man—no, he was just a boy, eighteen or nineteen—was finally looking at me, and I saw the blankness in his eyes, the slackness about his mouth that mark the mentally re-

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tarded. I let go of his shirt, feeling foolish as hell.

A defensive Elsie was by him now, her arm around him, and saying, "This is my brother, Jodie. He's my big, strong helper." She said it with the forced brightness of a mother trying to make her four-year-old feel good. "He's a little shy around strangers."

He was clinging to her, crying, but he sneaked a look at me. "I didn't want to hurt you. But you scared my sister. She was already sad, and you *scared* her!"

She kept patting him as one comforts a child, and I guessed it was the first she knew about him slipping out and clouting me when I left the night before. I told her about it, minimizing it now that I saw it for what it was. She merely nodded as if it weren't important, which of course it wasn't.

There was a soft mewing, whimpering sound from the bedroom suddenly, and the boy Jodie stopped crying, straightened up and hurried in, to return immediately carrying a sleepy-eyed baby.

Things were going too fast for me, and I just stood there staring stupidly. Elsie took the baby, got a bottle from a pan on the stove and sat down to feed it. She seemed oblivious to our presence, but we weren't about to leave with so many loose ends dangling. I found some chairs for Julia and me, and we sat down to wait. Jodie was leaning against the kitchen counter, watching his sister and the baby like a big, protective puppy.

Finally the girl looked up, and her face was transfigured. "This is Amy," she said dreamily. "Amarantha, really—Kurt named her—but Amarantha is such a big name for such a tiny little girl . . ." Her voice dwindled off.

"*Amarantha*," I heard Julia breathe, as she put out a tentative hand to touch the golden fuzz on the little head. My mind supplied a couple more lines: ". . . *Sweet and fair, Ah, braid no more that shining hair*!" Lovelace, also Seventeenth Century English Lit.

As if she'd read our thoughts, the girl said suddenly, "Kurt has written a lot of things lately. There's a pile of it over there by Jodie, if you want to see it."

I found a stack of notebooks on the counter, brought them back to where Julia and I were sitting and handed the top half to her. We started glancing through the closely written pages. I don't know how it struck Julia—she seemed almost in a trance—but I realized the stuff was good; not great, but very, very good. It was the record of a poet finally finding

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his voice. I felt a twinge of sympathy. When he was at last writing good poetry, he didn't dare publish.

"I'm not much for reading, but they sounded so pretty when Kurt read them out loud to me." Elsie held the baby to her shoulder and patted its back gently. "I don't think he'd want me to give them to you, but I know he wouldn't care if you read them."

We sat silently reading through the six notebooks, then I gathered them up and put them on the counter. Jodie gave me a friendly smile, accepting me now that his sister did, but all I wanted was to get out of there and read the letter that hung like lead in my jacket pocket. I reached for Julia's arm and she stood.

As we turned to go, Elsie looked at me appraisingly. "You really didn't come here to make any trouble for Kurt, did you?"

That was a hard question to answer, so I just gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile. Julia was an automaton at my side.

"I'll bet it was *you* he wrote to last week!" Elsie said. "I'll bet it sounded crazy and you were worried about him."

I looked at her sharply and hedged. "It wasn't very clear."

"He had this awful headache and started drinking to kill the pain. But it just got worse, and he started yelling and acting crazy. He tore up the whole apartment to find a stamp, and went out in the rain to mail that letter. I said I would, but it just made him mad. He said it wasn't anything to do with me. He wasn't used to drinking, so I guess that's what made him act like that."

I could almost see Lang, out of his mind from drink and pain and maybe a gnawing conscience, sending up one little smoke signal, like a hunter who was lost but not at all sure he wanted to be found. We turned again to go.

"Come back in an hour, and I'll take you to him." Elsie dropped the bombshell casually and walked off into the bedroom, humming softly into the baby's ear.

We got in the car and I waited for Julia to say something. I'd done what I promised to do. I'd found Lang for her, and in an hour we'd see him. For better or for worse, whatever we did now was up to her. Against all logic, I was hoping she would say, "Let's leave it alone. Let's go home." But of course she didn't.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, not looking at me.

"No."

"I'm not either, but I'd like a cup of coffee." Her eyes tried to

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stay away from the edge of the letter that stuck out of my pocket, but couldn't quite manage it.

I started the car. "OK. Let's get some, and see what Lang has to say for himself." I was getting scared. I didn't want to know what was in that letter. There were a lot of lives just about to get messed up, and I was sure mine was one of them.

Over our coffee, we started reading. I'd finish one page and hand it to her, while our coffee got cold and was replaced with hot by a hovering waitress. Finally, Julia gathered the seven pages together, folded them carefully and slipped them back into the envelope. She placed it precisely in the middle of the table between us.

"Well," I said. "Now we know."

"For two years I've felt almost like a murderess. I thought I'd failed him and he drank to get the confidence I couldn't give him." She took a sip of her coffee, which was cold again. "He says I tried to make a businessman out of him. I didn't, did I? He could have written poetry or driven a cab or volunteered as an astronaut. I wouldn't have cared."

"No. He just was frustrated and it's easier to blame you. And picking up that drunk drifter at the next bar is just the sort of thing Lang would have seen as a big joke—switching identities with a stranger, even trading jewelry and everything they had in their pockets to make it seem real. Ordinarily they'd have sobered up later, swapped back and you'd never have heard anything about it." I gave Julia a cigarette and lit hers and my own.

"He was in no shape to drive, so the other guy did and he was probably in no better condition. And when Lang was thrown clear of the wreck, he was still drunk enough to be cunning. He had a perfect chance to be a different person, so he just started walking. He must have walked a long way. No one ever reported picking up a hitchhiker in the vicinity that night."

"It's sad to think the man who died was never missed by *anyone*." She touched the letter with one slim finger. "But Lang says that's what appealed to him, the complete anonymity of the man; no ties, no relatives, no responsibilities. Pretending to be him, Lang was free to be anything he wanted to be. And he decided to be Kurt Sommers."

"I guess he met Elsie fairly soon after he settled down in Overton. He says they are married, and that he managed to get

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some identification so that his name was never questioned." I was puzzling over this. He'd have had to be fingerprinted to get a driver's license, so he probably didn't have one, but anyone can get a Social Security number and a few credit cards.

"He wrote the letter to you and hardly mentions me, so obviously he doesn't want to come back. He has Elsie and Amarantha. Oh, Max, that sweet baby would be illegitimate if— Then why did he send that strange note to me?"

"Conscience, I suppose. Gave you one cryptic clue and if you didn't follow up on it, it was your fault and he was home free. Or maybe he was just needling you, like he used to when he got tanked. Elsie said he was drinking that night, and wasn't used to it."

I picked up the envelope. "This letter is dated almost two months ago. Maybe he just couldn't make up his mind to mail it. Says he wants it all on record with 'someone close enough to understand but not involved enough to interfere.' "

"If he wrote it just since you've been in Overton, surely he wouldn't have gone into so much detail. After all, you're here and he could just tell you all of it." Julia looked at her watch. "Let's give him a chance to now."

Her voice was heavy with reluctance. I felt it too, but the hour was up, and we had to see this thing through.

As we walked into the hallway, Elsie was at her door, giving last-minute instructions to Jodie, who was holding the baby carefully against his big shoulder and frowning with concentration. She turned to greet us.

"We can walk. It's only a few blocks." She turned to her left outside the doorway, and we fell into step on either side of her. I kept glancing over at Julia, but her face was unreadable. My feet felt heavier with every step. I didn't want to see him. I just wanted to take Julia and go home. Lang Winters was as dead as we'd thought him to be, and it was Kurt Sommers who was waiting for us—husband, father, poet and stranger. But there wasn't any easy way out of this awfulness.

Elsie turned to climb some steps into a gloomy building, and we followed obediently in her wake. We entered a long, dimly lit hall where a thick, sweet smell hung in the air, faint incense or the mingled odors of a hundred kinds of stale flowers. She paused at a door, and I was only vaguely aware of an elderly man coming toward us, his footsteps muffled by the worn carpet. Elsie shook her

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head, and he retreated as she opened the door and we went in.

We stood in complete silence, staring at last at Lang Winters. His face was thinner than it was two years ago, more sensitive, and there was a little gray in his hair that was out of place in a man only twenty-eight years old; but it was Lang, or Kurt—or both. He wore the dark suit we'd seen Elsie carrying, the green-striped tie and an expression of impenetrable serenity. I involuntarily put one hand against the casket to steady myself and the other arm around Julia, who had gone as white and still as marble.

Elsie was speaking in a soft monotone. "The morning after he went out in the rain to mail that letter—Thursday, it was—his head was still hurting so much I talked him into going to a doctor. They took X rays and said he had a cerebral aneurism, a weak spot in an artery in the brain." She said the words carefully, as if she'd learned them by rote. "The doctor gave him something for the pain, but said he had to be careful not to exert himself or get real excited about anything. He was supposed to go to the hospital for tests the next day, but—"

I was sweating and my ears were ringing. I hadn't counted on seeing him like this, but I didn't miss a word of her explanation.

She went on. "We went home and he just sat in that big chair for a long time, I guess thinking about how bad things looked for him. Then he said he had to go out for a while. That was about noon Thursday, and at eight-thirty that night some people found him dead by the door of a bar downtown. He'd been drinking, and they say the aneurism just burst."

Her eyes left his face reluctantly and moved to mine. "I always thought he did something real bad just before he came to Overton, but he didn't tell me about it and I never pestered him to find out. I was afraid you were a policeman, and I didn't know what to do. It was too late to hurt him, but there's Amy—"

I put my hand to her cheek and said shakily, "You did right, Elsie. And thank you for letting us see him."

"Would you want to stay for the funeral? You, too, Miss Winters?"

I waited for Julia to answer that one, and it took her a minute. She looked deep into the girl's eyes and made a decision. "I'm afraid we won't be able to stay, but thank you. And it's *Mrs.* Winters."

"But I thought—" Elsie looked from Julia's ringless finger to me,

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a little embarrassed. "I thought—"

"I'm a widow." Julia said it slowly. "I lost my husband several years ago."

We left Elsie and Kurt Sommers there together, and walked out into the sunlight, which almost blinded us after the gloom of the mortuary.

Julia was quiet and so was I, for a while, but the silence got too heavy for me. It was stepping up the shakes I'd had ever since we had walked into the room and seen Lang. I had to say something, anything.

"That was a shock, but maybe now you can finally forget him. He looked good, didn't he, in spite of the nasty fall?"

"Nasty fall?" She turned and stared at me blankly. "Elsie didn't say—"

Something in my face must have made her stop, and I saw a curious expression come into her violet eyes—that uncanny mind-reading of hers again. She backed away from me and when she spoke again, her voice was like shaved ice. "You *knew*! And yet you let me walk in there expecting— You said you were out of town Thursday night. *Where were you?*"

"Julia, Julia—" I reached for her but she jerked away from me, right off the curb into the path of a cruising cab. It screamed to a stop, and when she saw what it was, she ran around to the far side and climbed into the back seat.

I stood there on the sidewalk with the smell of exhaust fumes in my nose and a taste like ashes in my mouth, thinking. Probably they could find out that Lang had called me Thursday a little after noon, asking me to come to Overton. Maybe they'd even find the service stations where I'd gassed up on that first trip. I hadn't tried to cover my tracks; I was half-numb from the shock of finding out he was alive. The numbness went away and a sort of cold fury took over when he asked me to help him put things in order. He said he didn't know if Julia would want him back, or even if he wanted to go back, but it was very important to him to get everything straightened out. He didn't mention mailing anything to Julia—he never had remembered things he did when he was drunk—and he didn't tell me what name he was using. So both my shock when Julia called me and the search itself were genuine. I just figured he was having a bad run of luck and wanted me to pull him out of his depression as I did in college. The beer in front of us was the same, but my feeling

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had changed considerably since those days.

With Lang dead, I'd always figured I'd eventually get Julia if I played my cards right and didn't rush her. I'm a patient man and I knew she was worth waiting for; but with him alive, I wasn't so sure. I knew I couldn't stand losing her to him again.

When we left the little basement bar where he'd had me meet him, we climbed up fourteen or fifteen steps to street level. I was ahead of him and when I reached the top step, there wasn't anyone in sight on the street. I didn't plan it at all—I just turned, put my hands against his chest and gave him a quick, hard shove. I remember his eyes, wide and unbelieving as he went over backwards and down, and then he lay without moving at the bottom of the steps, just short of the bar door. I went down quickly, with the idea that cracking his head a time or two against the cement would finish it, but when I saw his eyes still wide open and staring in blind astonishment, I knew there wasn't any need. No one saw any of it, I'm positive of that.

If he just hadn't written that damned thing to Julia . . .

Looking after her cab now, I couldn't even guess what she would do; let the dead past bury its doubly dead, or blow the whistle on me. It didn't matter, one way or the other. Once she'd figured it all out, she was lost to me for good, and that's about all the punishment I can handle.

Besides, what can be done to a person for killing a dead man?

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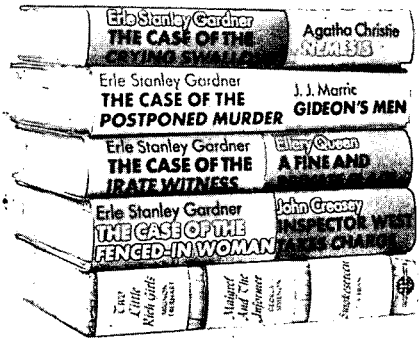

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